

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

2019

Find the MOST Here: The Academic Success of First-Year African American Students at the University of Mississippi

Shawnboda Deanne Mead

University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mead, Shawnboda Deanne, "Find the MOST Here: The Academic Success of First-Year African American Students at the University of Mississippi" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1640.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1640>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

FIND THE MOST HERE:

THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF FIRST-YEAR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

A Dissertation in Practice
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
in the Department of Higher Education
The University of Mississippi

by

SHAWNBODA MEAD, EARL PRESLEY, & ALEXANDRIA WHITE

May 2019

Copyright © 2019 Shawnboda Mead, Earl Presley, Alexandria White
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

ABSTRACT

Three researchers, Shawnboda Mead, Earl Presley, and Alexandria White, collaborated to complete this Dissertation in Practice (DiP) which includes three manuscripts. The three-member team identified the academic success of first-year African American students at predominantly White institutions as a complex problem of practice. Bean and Eaton's (2001) Psychological Model of Student Retention and Rodgers and Summers (2008) Revised Model of Retention for African American Students at Predominantly White Institutions provided the theoretical framework for this study. The study examines the relationship of academic success and first-year African American students who participated in the 2015 and 2016 Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent (MOST) Conference and respectively enrolled at the University of Mississippi during the Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 semesters. GPA data for 228 MOST participants and 547 Non-MOST participants were used to analyze three research questions determining if MOST participants earn a higher average *first semester* and *first-year GPA* than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi and if MOST participants earn a higher average first semester GPA than second semester GPA.

While not statistically significant, MOST participants earned higher first semester and first-year GPA than Non-MOST participants. Findings also revealed MOST participants experienced greater academic success during their first semester compared to their second semester and they achieved greater retention outcomes than Non-MOST participants. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) First Principles of equity, ethics, and social justice served as a guide for the research and recommendations for policy and practice.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation in practice to my family who has shown unwavering love and support throughout my pursuit of higher education. First, to the memory of my Grandfathers, who took such joy in my academic accomplishments over the years. I know the completion of this doctorate degree would have made you both very proud. To my Mother, Pamela, who has been there every step of the way. No amount of words is sufficient in expressing my gratitude for every sacrifice you have made. Thank you for always believing in my aspirations and supporting me in every endeavor. To my Grandmothers, Mother-in-Law, sisters, and brothers who have been my greatest cheerleaders. Your continuous support means so much to me.

To my husband, Neal, there is no way I could have done this without your encouragement and support. After a year in my first doctoral program, we suffered an unimaginable loss, and the degree was no longer a priority for me. When I wanted to begin this journey three years ago, you fully supported me. Thank you for continuously believing in me.

Finally, to my sons Christian O'Neal and Nolan Carter, you are my greatest sources of motivation and inspiration. Christian, thank you for your patience while doing "homework" and attending class over the past three years. I love your energy, personality, and kind spirit. Your excitement about my graduation has given me the extra boost I needed to get to the finish line. Nolan, you came in the midst of finishing up coursework and writing this DiP, but God's timing is always perfect. Your arrival gave me the extra motivation to finish this process. I hope the completion of this milestone is one example that the both of you can accomplish anything you dream.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our dissertation co-chairs, Dr. Amy Wells Dolan and Dr. Laura Antonow and committee members, Dr. David Rock and Dr. Whitney Webb. Dr. Wells Dolan, your leadership and insight into improving our research was invaluable. We have learned so much from you and are appreciative of your dedication to getting us to the finish line. To Dr. Laura Antonow who always provided prompt and intentional feedback, thank you for your unwavering support and positive energy. We are extremely thankful for the statistical expertise of Dr. David Rock whose continued encouragement and motivation was vital as we analyzed and interpreted our data. Dr. Whitney Webb, who we affectionately nicknamed the *APA Queen*, thank you for your detailed feedback and continuously motivating us throughout this process. Additionally, we owe special recognition to Dr. George McClellan and Dr. Neal Hutchens for serving as sounding boards and providing critical feedback throughout the writing process.

To our families, we appreciate your patience and support. We could not have achieved this milestone without you. We are forever grateful for your love, guidance, and encouragement.

To our individual departments, the Career Center, the Center for Inclusion & Cross Cultural Engagement and the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, we offer our sincerest gratitude for your support during the past three years.

To every rising high school senior who attended the MOST Conference and subsequently enrolled, we thank you for choosing the University of Mississippi. Through our professional practice and scholarly pursuits, we are committed to helping you *Find the MOST Here*. This dissertation is only possible because of you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
MANUSCRIPT ONE.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	2
PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.....	5
African American Student Success in Higher Education.....	4
African American Student Success at the University of Mississippi.....	8
The Mississippi Outreach Scholastic Talent Program.....	9
PROFESSIONAL POSITIONALITY AND ASSUMPTIONS	14
Professional Goals and Motivations.....	17
Personal and Professional Assumptions.....	18
Challenging Personal Views and Assumptions.....	21
CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.....	23
Within Scholarly Literature and Communities of Professional Practice.....	23
Within the Larger Field of Practice.....	25
Within the Local Context.....	27
Within the CPED First Principles.....	27

Proposed Frameworks.....	31
NEXT STEPS.....	36
Preliminary Research Questions.....	36
Potential Data Sources	37
Proposed Methods for Examining and Collecting Data	39
CONCLUSION.....	41
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	42
MANUSCRIPT TWO.....	50
PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.....	51
Research Questions and Hypotheses.....	54
Professional Positionality.....	55
CPED First Principles.....	56
Conceptual Frameworks.....	57
DATA EXPLORATION.....	59
Retention Data.....	60
Additional Data.....	64
FINDINGS.....	67
Data Analysis.....	68
Limitations of the Data.....	72
Challenges Interpreting Data.....	73
Further Considerations.....	74

SUMMARY OF RESULTS.....	75
Meaningful Connections.....	75
Addressing Hypothesis.....	79
Implications.....	79
CONCLUSION.....	81
REFERENCES.....	83
MANUSCRIPT 3.....	88
SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE.....	89
Theoretical Frameworks.....	91
Data Analysis.....	92
SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS.....	95
Research Question 1.....	95
Research Question 2.....	96
Research Question 3.....	97
Retention Findings.....	98
Participant Surveys.....	98
Reflection and Meaningful Connections.....	99
IMPROVING PRACTICE TO ENHANCE EQUITY, ETHICS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.....	102
Recommendations for Future Research	102

Recommendations for Practice.....	105
Dissemination of Findings.....	109
Further Considerations.....	110
SUMMARY OF MANUSCRIPT.....	113
CONCLUSION.....	114
REFERENCES.....	117
VITA.....	124

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1. Bean and Eaton: Psychological Model of Student Retention (2000).....	33
1.2. The revised model of retention for African American students at PWIs (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).....	35
2.1. First-Year Retention of MOST 2015 Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016.....	61
2.2. First-Year Retention of Non-MOST Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016.....	62
2.3. First-Year Retention of MOST 2016 Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2017.....	63
2.4. First-Year Retention of Non-MOST Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2017.....	64

LIST OF TABLES

1.1. The MOST Conference Attendance, Applications, and Enrollment Numbers.....	11
2.1. The first semester GPA and first-year GPA for African American MOST and Non-MOST participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and Fall 2017.....	68
2.2. The first semester GPA and second semester GPA for African American MOST participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and Fall 2017.	69
2.3. Descriptive statistics for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-MOST participants.....	69
2.4. Independent Sample T-test for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-MOST participants.....	70
2.5. Descriptive statistics for comparing first-year 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-MOST participants.....	71
2.6. Independent Sample T-test for comparing first-year 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-MOST participants.....	71
2.7. Descriptive statistics for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs and second semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants.....	72
2.8. Paired Sample T-test for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs and second semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants.....	72

MANUSCRIPT ONE

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The late 1960s and early 1970s are known as a period of time characterized by social and political unrest on college campuses across the nation (Thelin, 2004). Sit-ins, demonstrations, and riots mirrored a generation's growing demands for human rights (Thelin, 2004; Eagles, 2009; Embrick, Brusma, & Thomas, 2016). The 1960s also marked the beginning of desegregation efforts at state universities throughout the United States (Thelin, 2004; Eagles, 2009). According to Thelin (2004), “racial integration of state universities was contentious, even hostile with violent student protests and gubernatorial opposition” (p. 304). The state of Mississippi was no exception.

Although desegregation was required by law, Black students had difficulty enrolling in two of the three public, predominantly White universities in the state of Mississippi—The University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University (MSU), and The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) (Ballard, 2008; Bonney, 1965; Willett, 1997). Beginning in 1957, Clyde Kennard made several unsuccessful attempts to enroll in The University of Southern Mississippi. Kennard was never allowed to enroll at USM and died in 1963 after a tragic series of events that were put in place to keep Kennard out of the institution (Andrews, 2009). In October 1962, James Meredith became the first Black student to enroll at The University of Mississippi. However, his admission came after two unsuccessful attempts and a ruling from the United States Supreme Court (Ballard, 2008; Bonney, 1965). A night of rioting led to two people being killed and President John F. Kennedy sending in federal troops and U.S. Marshals to restore order to the Oxford campus (Eagles, 2009). Meredith was greeted with the singing of “Dixie,”

waving of confederate flags, and being called “nigger” by other students (Eagles, 2009). Less than five years after Meredith’s enrollment and three years after the Kennard incident, the peaceful enrollment of a Black student into an all-White institution in Mississippi occurred on July 19, 1965 with Richard Holmes entering Mississippi State University (Ballard, 2008; Bonney, 1965; Willett, 1997).

When African American students were admitted to all-White universities from 1948-1968, they faced isolation, shunning, sabotage and were excluded from participating in sports, living in residence halls, and eating in the cafeteria (Thelin, 2004). While the financial cost to attend state universities was relatively inexpensive, Black students paid for their enrollment in other ways that were often demeaning, dangerous, and negative. The tumultuous history of integration continues to influence the ability of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) to recruit, retain, and graduate African American students (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

CHAPTER II: THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

With the more peaceful enrollment of Richard Holmes at Mississippi State University in 1965, higher education in the state of Mississippi made considerable progress in desegregation. Many African American students still felt more comfortable attending the traditionally Black institutions in the state, but the historically White universities began making efforts to reach out to Black students in order to entice them academically and make them feel more comfortable socially (Ballard, 2008). Thus, the University of Mississippi created the Minority Achievement Conference (MAC), which dates back to the 1970s. In the 1990s, MAC was renamed the Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent (MOST) Conference.

In this Dissertation in Practice, we will explore the success of first-year African American students attending the University of Mississippi that prior to enrollment at the University, attended the Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent Conference. This population is important to study because the MOST Conference began as a program to address the University and state's segregationist past. As an early intervention, pre-admission program, the MOST Conference strives to lessen barriers, such as sense of belonging and lack of mentorship, to enrollment and persistence in higher education. Exploring the transition experiences of MOST participants is necessary in the University of Mississippi's pursuit of improving enrollment, retention, and graduation outcomes for African American students. Throughout the three manuscripts, we will define and measure student success through MOST participants' academic performance during their first year at the University of Mississippi.

African American Student Success in Higher Education

To address historical inequalities, colleges and universities have developed intentional programs and initiatives to aid in the access, recruitment, and retention of African American students. Rodgers and Summers (2008) concluded early intervention for African American students attending a PWI leads to overall academic success. Intentional pre-admission programs aid in creating a sense of belonging for students attending colleges and universities (Johnson, 2013). African American students attending PWIs specifically benefit from such programs (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). The Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP) is an example of an early arrival program that provides resources, mentorship and financial support to underrepresented students at Miami University-Ohio.

Despite the efforts of PWIs to expand access to higher education for underrepresented populations, retention and inclusion of African Americans continue to challenge colleges and universities: “Nationwide, the black student graduation rate remains at a dismally low 42 percent” (“Black Student,” 2006, p. 88). This issue is not one that is suddenly created once African American students enroll or one that is based solely on academic ability. The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2006) provided several explanations for disparities in graduation rates between Black students who persist and those who do not. Among the explanations were the quality of orientation and retention programs, availability of mentoring programs and opportunities for student organization involvement, racial climate, the lack of a large number of other Black students including social and cultural events, and the absence of family or financial support (“Black Student,” 2006). As the flagship public university, coupled with its unique racial history, the University of Mississippi is in an excellent position to support and expand its efforts in increasing access as well as fostering a more welcoming campus environment that

positively contributes to academic success. Quality pre-admission and mentoring programs, such as MOST, are a necessary first step to recruiting and retaining African American students.

As the benefits of diversity in higher education and the workplace are continuously demonstrated, historically marginalized communities must continue to have equitable access to higher education (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002). Given negative campus racial climates and disparities in graduation rates among White and African American students, we assert the enrollment and persistence of African American students in higher education, specifically at PWIs, is a complex and pressing problem of practice. The specific dimension of this problem to be addressed is the relationship of first-year African American students participating in the MOST Program and their academic success. As a student's first year academic success is foundational to their retention, the understanding of this dimension is critical to improving longer term graduation outcomes for African American students (Astin, 2005; Eakins & Eakins, 2017). Johnson (2013) asserted pre-college interventions such as the MOST Conference have led to favorable outcomes for student success.

Throughout history, African Americans attending PWIs have been tormented by physical beatings, cross-burnings, "slave auctions," and racist-themed fraternity parties (Boatright-Horowitz, Frazier, Harps-Logan, & Crockett, 2013). As scholar-practitioners, we must consider the impact of such experiences on the academic success of African American students. As cited in Boatright-Horowitz et al., (2013), African American students attending PWIs shared that they were intimidated, isolated, and believed their campus was a hostile environment. Racial microaggressions have been found to impact student experiences in various settings including their classrooms, residence halls, and student organizations (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Harwood, Choi, Orozco, Browne Hunt, & Mendenhall, 2015; Solórzano et al.,

2000). Harwood et al. (2012) explored the experiences of students of color living in the residence halls at a PWI and identified over 400 total racial microaggressions that influenced the students' perceptions of residential and campus life. The findings also suggested the outcomes of a negative campus climate for students of color included "poor academic performance, greater stress, and poor mental health problems" (Harwood et al., 2012, p. 160). In another study, 39% of students of color described feeling uncomfortable due to their race and 51% experienced stereotypes in classroom settings (Harwood et al., 2015). Harwood et al. (2015) findings also highlighted daily experiences with negative stereotypes, racist jokes, harassment, invalidation, and feelings of invisibility.

Solórzano et al. (2000) studied the racial experiences of 34 African American students attending three elite PWIs in the United States and described experiences students had with discrimination, hostility, self-doubt, scrutiny, invisibility, exhaustion, and limited sense of belonging. In Harper and Hurtado (2011), African American students tracked daily experiences with racism and recorded multiple forms of racism accompanied by feelings of isolation and discrimination. African American students attending PWIs are disproportionately targeted inside and outside the classroom. The combination of all of these experiences directly influence perceptions of campus climate and persistence of African American students. The harmful effects have also been well-documented and include (a) pain and hurt; (b) anger, stress, racial battle fatigue; (c) self-doubt; (d) poor academic performance; and (e) poor health outcomes (Solórzano, 2014). Sue and Constantine (2007) also described "a pattern of being overlooked, under-respected, and devalued" as common classroom experiences of students of color" (p. 137). Specifically, a 2018 University of Mississippi publication entitled *Microaggressions at the University of Mississippi: A report from the UM Race Diary Project* recounted students'

everyday lived experiences with microaggressions. The effects of racism and racial microaggressions on attrition, sense of belonging, mental health, involvement, and academics requires the attention of higher education administrators and scholar-practitioners.

Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011) suggested “as educational attainment increases, the level of awareness or exposure to racial microaggressions and Black misandry will increase” (p. 75). Reflecting on these findings, it is especially critical to understand the ways in which African American students experience their campuses and the lasting impact of racism on their ability to persist. Solórzano (2014) also asserted no matter the level of academic success, African Americans were subject to painful racist experiences. Improving the climate and culture for African American students attending PWIs is critical to their ability to succeed academically.

African American Student Success at the University of Mississippi

The University of Mississippi, founded in 1848, is commonly referred to as “Ole Miss.” The University has 15 academic schools and colleges including but not limited to the schools of law, pharmacy, and accountancy. The University has experienced significant growth over the past ten years. The total enrollment of undergraduates, graduate students, and professional students was 20,890 during the 2017-2018, compared to only 15,129 students in the 2007-2008 academic year (2017-2018 Mini Fact Book; 2007-2008 Mini Fact Book). Yet, only 2,667 (12.8%) of the 2017-2018 study body identified as African American (2017-2018 Mini Fact Book).

In recent years, the University has made strides to improve outcomes for historically underrepresented student populations (University of Mississippi, 2010; Diversity Matters, 2013; Flagship Forward, 2018). To aid in the growth and retention of underrepresented students, the University opened the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement in Fall of 2014. A

primary component of the Center's mission is to "develop programs and services that support the University of Mississippi's core value of inclusiveness" (CICCE About Us, n.d.). With the development of the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement, the July 2015 MOST Conference was revised. In January 2017, the University also established the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. In February 2018, the Mississippi Minority Retention Task Force was created. The goal of the task force is to make recommendations to enhance the retention of first-year, African American students from the state of Mississippi. Flagship Forward (2018), the current strategic plan of the University of Mississippi, calls for an "increase in diversity and excellence" which will be evaluated through "freshmen retention rates and four- and six-year graduation rates of students from underrepresented groups" (p. 29).

The Mississippi Outreach Scholastic Talent Program

Today, in part due to legal as well as moral obligations, the University strives to provide programs and services that increase access to higher education and the diversity of the student body (University of Mississippi, 2010; Diversity Matters, 2013; Flagship Forward, 2018). Since July 2015, the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement and Office of Admissions have partnered to host the MOST Conference, contributing to the enrollment of first-year, in-state African American students. While other universities host similar pre-admission programs, the MOST Conference is unique to the University of Mississippi. The MOST Conference is held in the summer for rising high school seniors. The goal of the expanded three-day, two-night conference is to expose prospective African American students from the state of Mississippi to higher education generally, and the University of Mississippi specifically, including campus resources, leadership activities, key application and enrollment dates, current students, faculty/staff, academic offerings, and financial aid and scholarship information. The MOST

Program also connects students and their families with faculty and staff who can answer questions related to academic support, potential majors and careers, cultural adjustments, social challenges and employment opportunities. During the conference, students are also paired with mentors who will remain connected with them through the college admission process and throughout their first year. MOST Conference attendees are also invited back to campus to participate in a one-day MOST Reunion, held in November.

The MOST Program made up of the conference, reunion, and mentoring program, serves as a primary strategy by which the University increases access to students of color and promotes diversity in the student population. While a goal of the conference is to enroll students at the University of Mississippi, we provide information about the eight public universities and encourage students to consider higher education in general. Nevertheless, the University has experienced solid application and enrollment numbers from students who attend the MOST conference. The MOST 2015 Conference, the first hosted in the new format, was held July 26-28, 2015. The conference attracted 428 rising high school seniors to the University of Mississippi's campus. The MOST 2016 Conference was held July 17-19, 2016 and attracted 335 participants. Table 1.1 includes a chart of attendance, application and enrollment data for the MOST 2015 and MOST 2016 attendees. This project will explore the academic success of the MOST 2015 and MOST 2016 participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi for their first year of college.

	Attended the MOST 2015 Conference	Attended the MOST 2016 Conference
Total Number In Attendance	428	335
Admitted to the University of Mississippi	202	186
Total Enrolled at the University of Mississippi	132	101
African American Enrollment at the University of Mississippi	129 <i>32.7% of in-state African American freshmen (394)</i>	99 <i>26% of in-state AA freshmen American Freshmen (380)</i>

Table 1.1: The MOST Conference Attendance, Applications, and Enrollment Numbers. Data is shown for MOST Conference 2015 and 2016 attendees.

When reviewing enrollment trends before the new MOST Conference was introduced, there was only a .4% increase in the University of Mississippi's total enrollment during the fall 2016 semester and a 6.9% decrease during the fall 2017 semester, compared to the fall 2015 semester (Fall Enrollment Trends, n.d.). Yet, when compared to fall 2015, there were respectively 11.4% and 6.4% increases in the enrollment of first-year, in-state African American students during the fall 2016 and fall 2017 semesters (Fall Enrollment Trends, n.d.). The in state, first-year African American student enrollment at the University of Mississippi in the 2016-2017 academic school year was 394 students; 32.7% were MOST Conference 2015 attendees (Fall Enrollment Trends, n.d.). During the 2017-2018 academic year, 380 in state,

first-year African American students enrolled at the University of Mississippi, 26 % were MOST Conference 2016 attendees (Fall Enrollment Trends, n.d.).

Many of the MOST participants who do enroll have shared stories about only choosing the University of Mississippi because of their participation in the MOST Conference. MOST students, like many other African American students attending PWIs, begin their college careers full of optimism and excitement. Despite their aspirations, compared to their White counterparts, African American students attending PWIs enroll and persist at lower rates (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008). Rodgers and Summers (2008) also affirmed despite their increase in enrolling at PWIs, “graduates of PWIs account for a disproportionately low percentage of degrees awarded to African American students” (p. 172). Additionally, the six-year graduation rate for African American students attending four-year institutions is a lower rate than their White peers (Newton, Ghee, & Langmeyer, 2014). As African American students navigate the campus environment, their integration into the institution is vital to their ability to persist (Tinto, 1993). In order to create a more inclusive and welcoming campus community for underrepresented students, Solorzano et al. (2000) suggested the following:

When a collegiate racial climate is positive, it includes (a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color; and (d) a college/university mission that reinforces the institution’s commitment to pluralism. (p. 62)

As Eakins and Eakins (2017) reiterated, intentional recruiting and retention efforts are necessary for increasing the enrollment of historically marginalized students. Recruitment and retention programs such as the MOST Program not only contribute to a positive racial climate, but also

influence graduation outcomes. While the University of Mississippi has made positive strides in first-year retention rates for African Americans, the University continues to struggle with African American student graduation rates. The first-year, fall-to-fall, retention rate of African American students of 85.1% is comparable to their White peers at 85.3%. However, according to the University's *Retention, Graduation and Student Success* UM Tableau dashboard, since 2006 the average four-year and six-year graduation rates for White students is respectively 49.7% and 64.2%; whereas the four-year and six-year graduation rates for African American students is 25.9% and 42.4% respectively. Studying the academic success of MOST participants in their first year is necessary for enhancing the overall graduation rates of African American students.

Given the three-day, two-night MOST Conference and one-day Reunion, this program requires dedicated financial and human resources. As the University continues to strive for increased access and improved retention outcomes for African American students, it is important to explore the academic success of MOST participants. If the MOST Program is found to contribute to the academic success of first-year African American students from the state of Mississippi at the University of Mississippi, then the MOST Program may be deserving of continued or increased support. If the MOST Program does not contribute to the success of first-year African American students, then the program may need re-tooling to promote academic success.

CHAPTER III: PROFESSIONAL POSITIONALITY AND ASSUMPTIONS

Having identified the complex problem of practice, we will address our professional positionality and assumptions that have led the researchers to explore this problem of practice. In this section, we will discuss professional goals and motivations, professional assumptions informed by scholarly inquiry, and personal assumptions based on experience. We will conclude this section by addressing how our positions and assumptions have changed in the process of identifying the problem of practice.

The enrollment and persistence rates of marginalized groups have presented a noteworthy challenge for higher education institutions in the pursuit of social justice. This problem is exacerbated even with the progression of African American enrollment; they are still “graduating at significantly lower rates than their nonblack counterparts” (Bir & Myrick, 2015, p. 22). To address this inequality, institutions have utilized various ventures to increase admission and retention rates of specific marginalized groups. African American students are commonly targeted for this increased focus. Consequently, the issue is even more pronounced at PWIs where African American enrollment and persistence rates are disproportionately disadvantaged compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). African American students face a myriad of social, cultural, and financial hurdles many White students do not encounter during their journey towards degree attainment.

Research from Vincent Tinto (2012) divulged the use of academic and social support programs to be beneficial in assisting universities with retaining students. In terms of academic readiness, many African American students are insufficiently prepared for the academic rigors of

collegiate study. Strayhorn (2012) proclaimed African American students are underprepared for college, especially if they are from urban neighborhoods. Social support and campus integration is another factor that may influence African American student departure. Tinto (1993) stated students are more likely to withdraw from college if they are not integrated into their university culture.

As scholar-practitioners, it is imperative we encapsulate the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) framework as we engage complex social problems through the lenses of ethics, equity, and social justice. Scholar-practitioners, as defined by CPED, utilize their professional skills and knowledge to name, frame, and solve problems of practice (CPED Initiative About Us, n.d.).

Shawnboda Mead came to the University of Mississippi in July 2014 as the inaugural director of the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement. Previously, Mead served as the associate director of diversity and multicultural education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Mead has 14 years of experience supporting underrepresented student populations, coordinating diversity education programming and training, and responding to incidents of bias on college campuses. Mead earned a bachelor's degree in educational psychology from Mississippi State University and a master's degree in student affairs/higher education administration from Western Kentucky University. She has also held previous positions in residence life and student activities at Western Kentucky University, the University of Southern Mississippi, and Texas A&M University. Mead has co-chaired the MOST Planning Committee since January 2015. In September 2018, she advanced to the position of Assistant Vice Chancellor for Diversity within the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement.

Alexandria White is Assistant Director of the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement at the University of Mississippi. Self-identified as a non-traditional, first-generation college student, White is motivated in her professional work because she faced challenges in her background that often hinder the success of underrepresented students. White has 8 years of personal experience and professional knowledge that have equipped her with skills to aid underrepresented students in successful higher education completion. By advocating for single mothers, facilitating diversity conversations and aiding in the mentorship of underrepresented students, White has been able to aid others through college. White finished her bachelor's degree at Indiana University. She attended Ball State University where she earned a Master of Arts in Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education degree. White has assisted and created assessment resources for the MOST Conference and Mentoring Program since October 2016.

EJ Presley serves as the Assistant Director of Career Development at the University of Mississippi's Career Center. His six years of experience include positions in mental health, wellness, and first-year experience with collegiate students. Presley earned his bachelor's degree in psychology and master's degree in clinical mental health counseling from the University of Mississippi. Formerly, Presley was an academic advisor at the University where he primarily worked with academic, persistence, and retention-based efforts for students. As an academic advisor, Presley also served as the coordinator of the department's first-generation college student initiative. Presley has volunteered and presented at MOST Conferences since July 2017. He joined the MOST Planning Committee in January 2018.

Professional Goals and Motivations

Our goal is to address the enrollment and persistence of African American students in higher education, specifically PWIs. As African American scholar-practitioners who also attended PWIs, our problem of practice is both professionally and personally relevant. Our collective passion for social justice, a goal to create welcoming campus climates, and a desire to make a difference in the lives of students is a driving force for this project. The declining enrollment and retention of African American students nationally have influenced us to seek a meaningful solution to this pressing problem at the University of Mississippi (Strayhorn, 2012). We also wish to improve the MOST Program and the first-year experience of African American students. Because understanding the enrollment and success of African American students is a national issue, we believe examining this subject encompasses the CPED First principles of equity, ethics, and social justice.

The MOST Conference and mentorship program seeks to support the admission and retention of African American students at the University of Mississippi. This initiative's goal is to provide prospective African American students with exposure to leadership activities, campus resources, and various stakeholders. The mentoring component seeks to provide academic and social support to MOST participants throughout their senior year of high school and first year at the University. The need for increased African American student enrollment and retention is an ever-present challenge higher education practitioners must satiate. Institutions are seeking multifaceted approaches to improve outcomes for African American students. The MOST Program is the University's primary effort to rectify the decline in the recruitment and retention of African American students. Research by Johnson (2013) noted:

To increase the success of African American students, many predominately White institutions have implemented a variety of academic retention strategies (e.g., support programs, programs for first-year students, mentoring programs), as well as made retention an institution-wide commitment. (p. 40)

In the past, the University of Mississippi has struggled to overcome an intolerant climate for African American students. Since the enrollment of James Meredith, racial tension has been well documented (Eagles, 2009; Cohdas, 1997; Turner, 2010). The negative perceptions of race and racism have hindered the enrollment of African American students (Luther & Gallant, 2016; Svrluga, 2016). In an attempt to promote the success of African American students at the University of Mississippi, the MOST Conference and mentorship program has been expanded. Institutional goals for the MOST Conference and mentorship program are intertwined with the University of Mississippi 2020 Strategic Plan. Per the University of Mississippi 2020 Strategic Plan, the following objectives coincide with the mission of the initiative to: (a) provide opportunities to ensure that all students succeed academically; (b) promote broad cultural awareness by weaving academic, civic, and global engagement into more aspects of student life; and (c) provide an enduring shared experience that fosters a feeling of belonging, promotes school spirit, and celebrates our university as a unique community (University of Mississippi, 2010, p.15). With this as a guide, the University's leadership seeks to create an inclusive nurturing environment for prospective and current African American students. As a public institution, it is important to stand firm in our commitment to inclusivity, access, and cultural awareness.

Personal and Professional Assumptions

The following findings were found in the literature and we agree with the assertions:

1. Current policy-making for equitable access has not led to sustainable progress in increasing access for African American students (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009).
2. In order for institutions to increase minority enrollment efforts, they must implement diversity strategies for recruiting and retention in their strategic planning (Eakins & Eakins, 2017).
3. For African American students attending four-year institutions, their six-year graduation percentage is statistically lower than their Caucasian counterparts (Newton, Ghee, & Langmeyer, 2014).
4. Traditional retention models must encompass the effects of race and culture when accounting for experiences and psychological processes of African American students attending PWIs (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).
5. Early intervention and First-year mentoring programs show increased retention and persistence amongst African American students (Johnson, 2013).

In addition to researched based assumptions, we have also identified personal assumptions regarding the problem of practice. To shape our personal assumptions, we must first characterize our professional and personal positions in order to provide a holistic perspective of our relationship with the pressing problem.

The enrollment and retention of African American students hold significant value in the researchers' pursuit of ethics, equity, and social justice. Understanding the social and cultural capital gained from baccalaureate degree attainment (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), we are compelled to explore additional efforts to enroll and retain African American students at PWIs and at the University of Mississippi specifically. Our personal journeys throughout the higher education landscape have profoundly influenced our views regarding the

matriculation of African American students. In addition, as African American scholar-practitioners employed by the University of Mississippi, we are professionally obligated to examine this pressing problem at our own institution. Collectively, we have a vested interest in assessing and improving the MOST Program as well as the overall success of African American students. Jointly, we organize or coordinate an aspect of the conference to ensure that it is not only beneficial for the students but also to the institution. As native Mississippians, we have all progressed from diverse low socioeconomic environments to pursue higher education and persist to graduation. With that in mind, we are dedicated to seeking additional resources for African American student enrollment and retention at the University of Mississippi. Our personal assumptions are listed below.

1. There is a need for additional programs similar to the MOST Conference that foster a sense of belonging at PWIs.
2. African American Mississippians have negative perceptions of the University of Mississippi.
3. Students of color have the capacity to succeed at a PWI, but their experience navigating the campus will be different from their White counterparts.
4. MOST participants will persist at a greater rate than non-MOST African American first-year students at the University.
5. Compared to their White counterparts, MOST Program participants' perceptions of campus climate differs over time due to experiencing overt or subtle forms of racism.
6. African American students face a multitude of elements that increase inequalities in higher education that Caucasian students do not face.

7. Higher education administrators must proactively assess future resources and initiatives to increase African American student retention.

Challenging Personal Views and Assumptions

The University of Mississippi has made great strides to combat the negative perceptions that have plagued the University in relation to African American student enrollment and retention. Through targeted initiatives such as the MOST Conference, the University has demonstrated a willingness to expend resources that support African American students. The University understands such initiatives are important to integrate African American students into the campus culture. The question we are considering is how effectively the MOST initiative is impacting the academic success and retention of African American students. Through scholarly research, we have found mentoring, an institution-wide commitment, and first-year early intervention programs are significant in the retention and enrollment of African American students (Johnson, 2013).

One assumption that has changed or differed from the examination of this problem of practice is the perception of the University of Mississippi. The MOST Conference has provided students a multifaceted perspective of how the University supports African American students. Post-conference surveys and testimonials have revealed the MOST Conference has dispelled some misconceptions towards the University. Another assumption that has been challenged is the current policies and practices that the University has employed in terms of enrolling and retaining African American students. Research by Talbert (2012) identified the need for an educational inclusive environment. A critical look at existing policies and practices might reveal systemic inequities that are counter to the institutional value of inclusivity. Fischer (2007) argued, “Students who lack sufficient interaction with others on campus or have negative

experiences may decide to depart the university as a result of this reevaluation” (p.126). Noting the discriminatory past of the University of Mississippi, we understand many African American students have not had positive experiences at the University. As scholar-practitioners, we seek to dispel this negative perception of the University while also promoting inclusivity.

As noted previously, the MOST Program has counteracted some of the University’s negative stereotypes. Through this exploration of MOST participants’ academic performance, we hope to utilize the data gathered to formulate targeted efforts that will lead to more positive experiences for African American students. Talbert (2012) noted a diverse demographic of faculty, staff, and academic administrators should be evident at institutions to ensure equity for a growing multicultural student population. Because this is a need at other PWIs, through scholarly inquiry, we seek to understand the effects of mentoring on GPA for African American students who have participated in the MOST Program. Furthermore, underrepresented students are demanding changes in “curriculum, social context, and other facets of higher education in hopes of a more equitable educational system” (Eakins & Eakins, 2017, p. 51). Through our inquiry of the MOST Program, we seek to provide an equitable framework for increased initiatives centered on ethics, equity, and social justice at the University of Mississippi. While we assume there is a need for more programs like the MOST Conference, ongoing assessment is needed to determine the program’s effectiveness. In our research, we seek to improve the transition to college and promote academic success for African American students at the University of Mississippi using the MOST Program as a lens for exploration and vehicle for change.

CHAPTER IV: CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Before reviewing and collecting data, deeper inquiry into the problem of practice is necessary. In this section, we will contextualize the problem of practice through various lenses including scholarly literature, the larger field of practice, the local context and the CPED First Principles of equity, ethics, and social justice. Depicted in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, we will conclude this section by introducing the conceptual framework to be used to further explore the problem of practice.

Within Scholarly Literature and Communities of Professional Practice

Cartledge, Baldwin, Persall, and Woolley (2015) concluded, “Higher education institutions seek to attract and wield low-socioeconomic enrollment in an effort to create a diverse culture and serve the societal welfare” (p. 1). African American students are frequently associated with low-socioeconomic status secondary schools that have not adequately prepared them for the academic rigor of higher education (Fischer, 2007). To encompass the tenets of ethics, equity, and social justice, higher education administrators must provide support and resources towards increasing African American enrollment and retention. Recognizing this issue stems from decades of social, economic, and political inequities, the urgency of rectifying this problem is paramount. Tinto (2012) suggested, “The benefits of education accrue to our nation as a whole” (p. 2). Degree attainment provides more economic and financial advantages compared to non-college graduates (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012).

In terms of global competitiveness, the need for enrolling and graduating an ethnically diverse student population is equally important. Tinto (2012) explained, “a college-educated

workforce is critical to our nation's ability to remain competitive" in the global market (p. 2). In regard to higher education in the United States, "unless we do a better job in graduating more of our students from college, we will slip even farther behind" (Tinto, 2012, p. 2). Moreover, Tinto (2012) stated, "where once we were world leaders in the proportion of our population between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-five holding a college certificate or degree, this is no longer the case" (p. 2). To combat this, institutions have initiated various recruitment initiatives, retention strategies, and inclusion activities for diverse student populations (Talbert, 2012).

By increasing the enrollment of African American students in higher education, institutions can provide the social and economic capital these students may not have gained from their low socioeconomic status communities (Karimshah et al., 2013). Astin (2005) noted, "students who come from well-educated families have an advantage when it comes to completing college" (p. 9). Providing higher education access to African American students ensures they are exposed to numerous degrees of social capitalism. By ensuring African American student persistence, institutions are making an investment in their student's ability to gain economic capital that in turn benefits society as a whole.

The retention of students can be a complex issue for institutions. Research by Aljohani (2016) stated, "student retention rates have been a major concern for tertiary institutions around the world since the establishment of formal education" (p.1). The retention rates of African American students are lower compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Johnson, 2013; Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2008). Furthermore, African American students' enrollment has declined because of numerous factors such as "continued over-reliance on racially-biased college entrance exams; increased statewide admission standards for public postsecondary education, without corresponding advances in K-12 schools; reports of racism and negative African

American student experiences at PWIs” (Harper et al., 2009, p. 398). Various researchers noted retention programs and initiatives are appropriate to increase student persistence and to integrate students into the campus culture (Tinto, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Fischer, 2007). Moreover, many African American students note campus climate affects their integration into institutions as they attempt to matriculate towards graduation (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Fischer, 2007; Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

Within the Larger Field of Practice

As with all enrollment and retention initiatives, there will be some drawbacks. Tinto (2012) noted that early intervention programs are effective for student retention. We assert a retention initiative that encompasses the student's entire tenure at an institution will yield higher persistence and graduation rates. In regard to recruiting African American students, Eakins and Eakins (2017) noted, “while college fairs and high school settings are all prodigious sources for engaging with prospective students, recruiters can also scout community centers, churches, and bridge programs” (p. 53). This approach may be useful for large economically stable universities, but budget constraints can hinder the ability to recruit African American students in various settings for smaller universities. Another suggestion offered by Eakins and Eakins (2017) is administrators “should ensure that they are hosting events specifically for African American students as early as new student orientation” (p.54). This approach has merit in terms of building a community for African American students. Furthermore, this approach may justify some criticism, but research from Eakins and Eakins (2017) suggested cohort style recruitment could be beneficial for universities to increase their recruitment efforts for African American students (p. 53). Additionally, researchers have noted mentoring for African American students has been beneficial for enrollment and retention purposes (Davis, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Rodgers

& Summers, 2008). In addition, institutions can enhance efforts by incorporating African American faculty and staff in the mentoring relationship.

There are also strengths to the various approaches to increase enrollment and retention of African American students. Universities that provide African American students with opportunities to grow and develop through specialized programs and internships are more likely to succeed in retaining this student population (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). As it has been noted by numerous researchers (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Fischer, 2007), African American students are more likely to succeed when they feel they are incorporated into the campus culture and climate. Another useful retention approach for African American students is social support programs. According to Grier-Reed et al. (2008), “Facilitating intact social support systems and psychological well-being for Black college students is imperative, particularly on predominantly White campuses” (p. 476). The use of social support systems can assist students to cope with factors outside of academics. African American students face a host of factors that may affect their retention at the collegiate level (Harper et al., 2009). Moreover, African American students may encounter more financial hardships than other student populations. Eakins & Eakins (2017) explained, “Personal finance is one of the contributing factors to the attrition rates of African American students at post-secondary institutions” (p. 55). Researchers have noted a comprehensive retention program that incorporates financial literacy is beneficial for the retention of African American students (Johnson, 2013; Eakins & Eakins, 2017). Furthermore, McCallum (2016) noted incorporating familial support into a retention program could assist in the enrollment of African American students in college. Researchers also suggest retention programs that assess African American student academic goals are also useful for student persistence (Talbert, 2012).

Within the Local Context

In the state of Mississippi, the recruitment and retention of African American students have become a pressing issue. Specifically, at the University of Mississippi, the University's racial history has not displayed a pattern of inclusivity for African American students. In an effort to promote inclusion, the administrators understood a reform of past policies and practices was needed. In recent years, the University has focused additional resources and programming towards alleviating this negative stigma. The University has implemented the MOST Conference as a tool for the recruitment of African American students. The University has also provided resources to assist in the retention of African American students and other students of color. The Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement can be categorized as an additional resource the University has employed. In addition, the University has enhanced diversity efforts with the formation of the Ole Miss Opportunity Scholars program and the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. The University has also enacted the diversity initiatives outlined in the University of Mississippi's Action Plan, which seeks to improve diversity and inclusiveness. With the additional focus and resources attributed to diversity and inclusiveness, the need for increased enrollment and retention of African American students is still warranted at the university. Understanding that this problem extends beyond Mississippi, further policies and practices are merited towards addressing this problem.

Within the CPED First Principles

The University of Mississippi is a member of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). Therefore, the three-part manuscript is in part to fulfill requirements for the Dissertation in Practice at the University of Mississippi. Thus, a key priority of our project is to explore the problem of practice through the lens of CPED First principles of equity, ethics, and

social justice. In this section, we will identify and discuss issues of equity, ethics, and social justice as they individually connect to the problem of practice.

Equity. Providing the University of Alabama and the University of Georgia as examples of where hostile racial integration efforts took place, Thelin (2004) indicated desegregation in southern universities was “marginal at best and typically slow” (p. 304). Again, the state of Mississippi was no exception. Today, as the flagship institution of the state, the University of Mississippi still has an obligation to remove systemic barriers preventing the enrollment of historically marginalized students. Since the turbulent integration of James Meredith in 1962, the University has struggled to overcome the negative perception of exclusivity, specifically for in-state African Americans. The history of segregation at the University and across the South presents a compelling argument for viewing access to higher education and student success through an ethical lens. Because the racial inequality and discrimination in both secondary and higher education have been well documented (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013; Harper & Hurtado, 2011; Solorzano et al., 2000), institutions of higher education must consider the long-term effects of limited access to education on the outcomes for African American students.

Once students overcome barriers to enrollment, institutions must then address campus climate issues that negatively affect students’ ability to persist to the second year and beyond to graduation. Embrick, Brusma, and Thomas (2016) reported during the 2015 calendar year, approximately 80 student groups, primarily African American, presented their colleges and universities with verbal or written statements demanding an improved racial climate. The increase in student activism and protests are outward expressions of African American students growing weary of the daily acts of racism. There has been a tendency for higher education to treat racial incidents as a public relations concern and not a human issue (Embrick et al., 2016;

Harper & Hurtado, 2011). Acknowledging the negative impact racism has on African American students is the first step in developing sustainable strategies for improving campus racial climate. Harper and Hurtado (2011) concluded, “The realities of race are typically made transparent only when there is a highly publicized, racially motivated incident or when embarrassing findings from an external auditor are made public” (p. 287). This practice, which negates the hurtful and detrimental effects of racism, can no longer dictate institutional response to campus climate issues.

Perhaps, there is also a relationship between rising racial tension and the attrition of African Americans attending PWIs. Embrick et al. (2016) revealed that university presidents described their campus racial climate and race relations as more positive than other colleges and universities. This inability to recognize their own shortcomings provides some rationale for the limited resources often directed towards the success of underrepresented student populations. Addressing the widespread occurrences of racial inequality and discrimination will positively affect African Americans in higher education and beyond: “A nurturing environment for black students is almost certain to have a positive impact on black student retention and graduation rates” (“Black Student,” p. 90). The MOST Program is designed to have such an impact. Specifically, extending an invitation for rising high school seniors to attend the summer conference, take part in the MOST Reunion, and enroll in the Mentoring Program are all aimed at evening the playing field and equipping students with the tools they need to successfully navigate higher education. During every interaction with prospective students, their parents and/or guardians are also presented with information about the collegiate experience. Through informational sessions, dialogue with professional staff and targeted mailings, family members are given resources for navigating admissions and enrollment processes. This additional focus

on family members allows the University to provide essential resources that lessen the gap in pre-college access to higher education.

Ethics. According to Thelin (2004), “students tried with varying degrees of effort and success to evade or overturn the race-based restrictions imposed on black students” (p. 304). James Meredith, Clyde Kennard, and Richard Holmes were the pioneers of the effort to desegregate universities in Mississippi. An integration crisis involving the registration of James Meredith put the University of Mississippi on a “verge of disaster” that would not only impact the University but the state of Mississippi for many years to come (Ballard, 2008, p. 148). According to Ballard (2008), “Mississippi’s bigoted, irresponsible governor, Ross Barnett, fueled the flames with his open resistance” (p. 148). More than 500 United States Marshals and 23,000 federal troops were on hand to respond to the ensuing riots and aid in Meredith’s enrollment (Eagles, 2009). Ballard (2008) summarized the events that took place by concluding, “by the time the smoke cleared there had been death and destruction on the Ole Miss campus that could have and should have been avoided” (p. 148). Meredith’s enrollment gained national attention, and his story is well known throughout the state. Even in 1965, three years after Meredith began at the University, there were only five African American students enrolled at the institution (Negro student, 1965).

While the University has made significant strides in increasing access and support for African American students, the resistance to the enrollment of James Meredith has contributed to a lasting narrative about the University not being a welcoming place for African Americans. From an ethical lens, the University must continue to distance itself from such a narrative in both policy and practice. Given the history of exclusion, there have been lasting negative effects on the ability to recruit and retain African American students. Therefore, ensuring the success of

students through pre-collegiate initiatives such as the MOST Program allows the University to fulfill its stated core value—and moral obligation—of inclusiveness.

Social Justice. While there were instances of voluntary integration of all-White state universities before the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision, many desegregation efforts of state universities during the 1960s were “largely a matter of halfhearted, token compliance” (Thelin, 2004, p. 304). Today, higher education institutions, specifically PWIs, have the unique opportunity to serve as a model for local and national communities. Early intervention and first-year mentoring programs, such as the MOST Program, provide a support network that is essential to the retention and persistence of African American students enrolled at PWIs (Johnson, 2013). Additionally, improved enrollment, retention and graduation rates lead to more students of color entering the workforce (Harper et al., 2009; Harper & Hurtado, 2011).

African American student success is closely connected to how they experience racism on college campuses (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Therefore, pre-admission programs and academic interactions are fundamental to the success of African American students (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Because of existing inequities in enrollment and graduation rates at the University of Mississippi and within higher education, there is a need to continuously address social inequities.

Proposed Frameworks

Colleges and universities have allotted numerous resources to understand the admission, persistence, and retention of college students. Theorists, academics, and higher education professionals have created and used various student retention models to assist in overall retention strategies for students. Based on expectations created by these models, professionals have enacted numerous programs and plans to aid in student retention. In order to fully understand

the relevance of student retention, a concise look into former and current theories associated with student retention is important.

Theorist Vincent Tinto has been a trailblazer in researching and providing models for student retention. Tinto (1988) created a model that emphasized stages of student retention and how students eventually left a college or university. In 1993, Tinto authored a well-known book entitled, *Leaving College*, that reiterated his findings on student persistence. Key findings revealed student retention is connected to the university's commitment to inclusive and equitable practices for students, specifically for students of color, non-traditional and graduate students. Additionally, the mindset of why students leave college is important to understanding overall retention. Because of Tinto's findings, theorists wanted to explore how the overall mindset of students contributes to retention. In 2000, Bean and Eaton created a psychological model, highlighted in Figure 1.1, emphasizing the mental aspects of retention often associated with students. The four interactions emphasized were bureaucratic, academic, social and external interactions. The conceptual framework selected to use for this research was modeled after Bean and Eaton's psychological model. In order to expand upon student retention, Bean created the Nine Themes of College Student Retention (2005). The themes identified were institutional fit and commitment, psychological processes and key attitudes, academics, social factors, bureaucratic factors, external environment, student background, and finances.

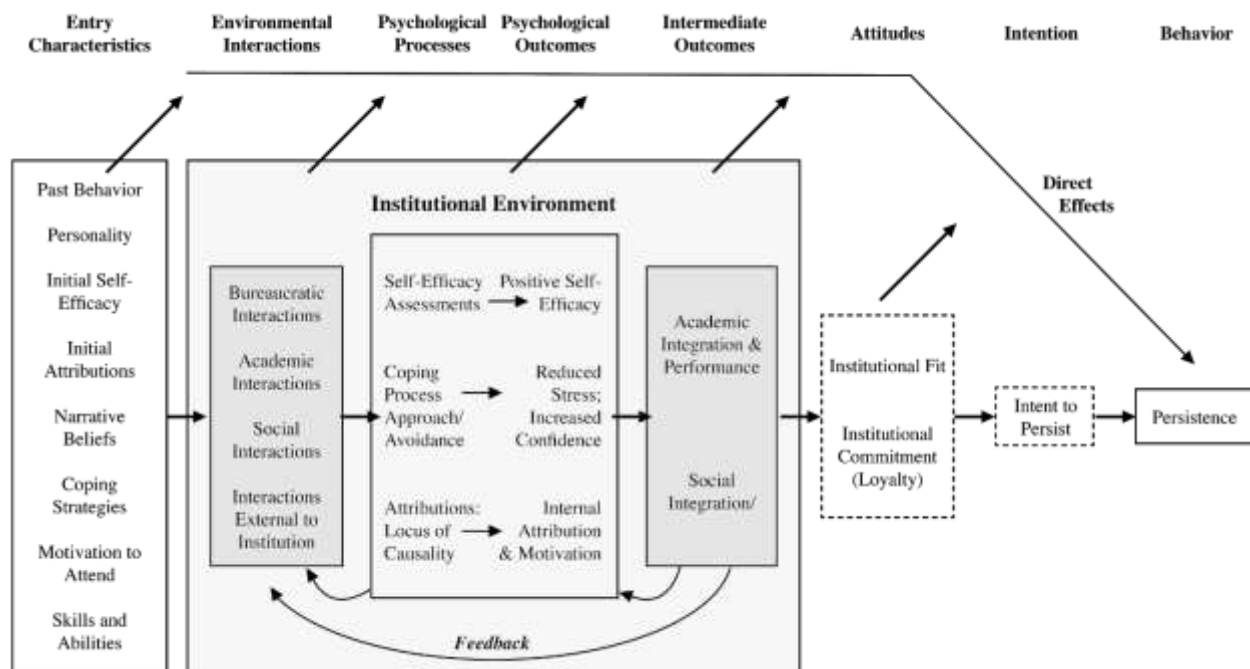


Figure 1.1. Bean and Eaton: Psychological Model of Student Retention (2000)

The psychological model created by Bean and Eaton was extensive but it did not address the lived experiences of African American students in college. The experiences of African American students in higher education is considerably different than their White peers. In order to get a more robust understanding of retention related to African Americans it is essential to evaluate and add data to support narratives. This will be done by creating a framework and theoretical foundation for this research. To further support the experiences of African American students, Rodgers and Summers created a model adding validity to how African Americans experience college.

Given the proposed problem of practice, an intentional framework would allow a stronger foundation for the research. Therefore, the first goal was to identify relevant theory and then find a specific model to aid in the research questions. Being able to reconsider former retention models to a specific demographic was helpful for research. Further investigation into relevant

theories produced a specific theory pertaining to African American students at predominantly White institutions. In 2008, Rodgers and Summers revised the Bean and Eaton's model and added characteristics that pertained to African American students at predominantly White institutions. According to Rodgers and Summers (2008), students' attitudes toward an institution affect their sense of belonging. Academic efficacy is connected to a sense of belonging for African American students. According to van Laar (2005), for African American students the first year of college is a time when they compare their academic abilities to their White peers. Utilizing this research was the basis for the interest in the immediate study of academics for the targeted demographic in the research. Figure 1.2 outlines the revised model created by Rodgers and Summers (2008) which includes new interactions that are highlighted in bold.

Using a conceptual framework grounded in theories has been applied to numerous studies associated with retention. These theories have been used to facilitate numerous discussions, articles, and critiques on the importance of retention for African Americans at predominantly White institutions. In 2016, the Canadian Center of Science and Education published an article entitled, *A Comprehensive Review of the Major Studies and Theoretical Models of Student Retention in Higher Education* to discuss the various retention theories and how they affected overall education. The goal of this article was to compile all theories associated with retention in order to understand the history and ever-changing models of retention. Being able to investigate these theories allowed the introduction of a relatable problem of practice for research.

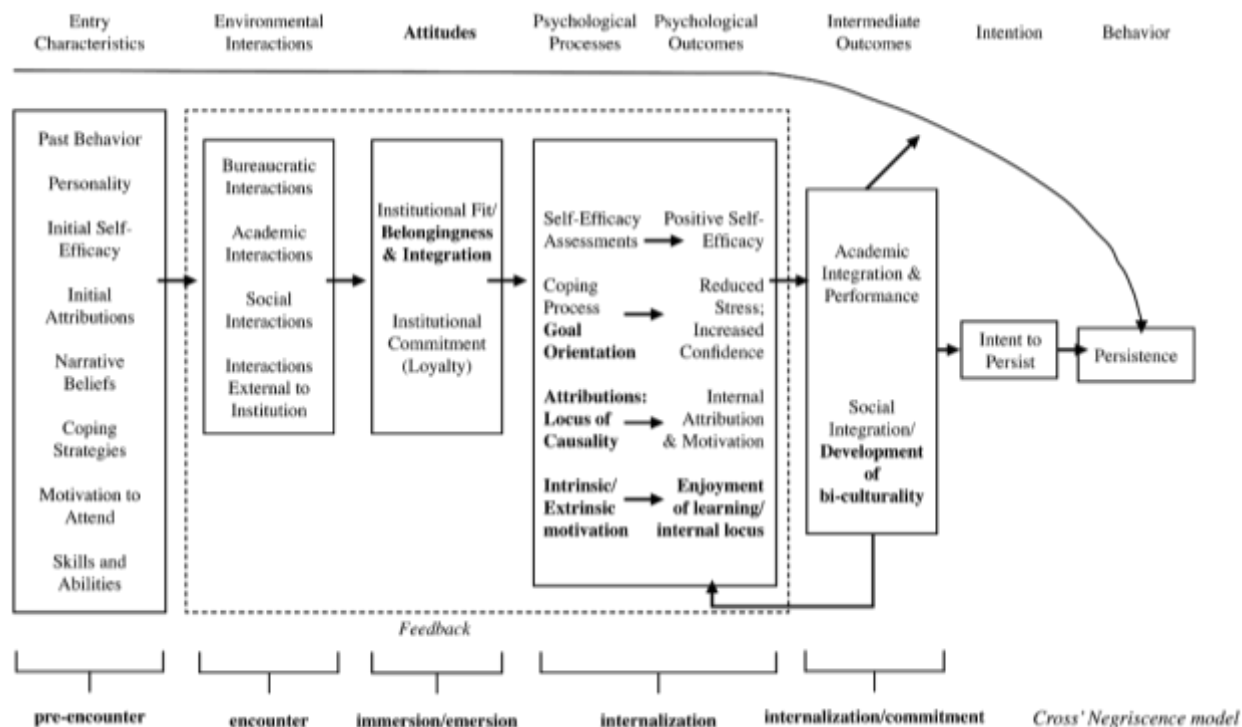


Figure 1.2. The revised model of retention for African American students at PWIs (Rodgers & Summers, 2008)

The catalyst for the proposed problem of practice is based on a pre-admission and mentoring program for African American students attending a predominantly White institution. The MOST Program is an initiative that helps attract rising high school seniors to the University of Mississippi. The program has evolved into a cohort-based mentoring program that aids in the retention of this demographic group. In order to understand the impact of the MOST Mentoring program for freshman, an analysis of academic efficacy should be measured. Using intentional questions to understand and evaluate the academic aspect of the MOST Mentoring participants allows the research to support or refute the Rodgers and Summers (2008) model regarding African American students at PWIs. The research on the MOST Mentoring program can aid in the institutional mission to improve retention as well as provide a sense of belonging for a targeted demographic.

CHAPTER V: NEXT STEPS

In the previous section, we explored the problem of practice through scholarly literature, the CPED First Principles, and conceptual framework. This section will reveal the plan of action for advancing our Dissertation in Practice. Next, we will identify the research questions and describe the proposed methods for collecting and interpreting data. Ethical considerations will also be discussed.

Preliminary Research Questions

Our primary analyses will examine MOST participants' academic success at the University of Mississippi. It is our contention that measuring the academic success of the MOST participants will aid in improving enrollment, retention, and graduation outcomes for African American students at the University. We will explore the academic performance of MOST participants using a statistical model. The following research questions will be evaluated and interpreted for the problem of practice:

1. Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first semester GPA* than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?
2. Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first-year GPA* than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?
3. During their first year at the University of Mississippi, do MOST participants earn a higher average first semester GPA than second semester GPA?

The basis of these research questions is to determine if MOST students perform better academically than other African American students who do not participate in the MOST

program. The attendees of the MOST Conference establish a community before their arrival at the University of Mississippi. This aids in a sense of belonging when they become enrolled as a freshman. In addition to an established sense of community, a mentoring relationship is fostered with upperclassmen providing ongoing support from the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement at the University of Mississippi.

Potential Data Sources

To answer our research questions, data will be retrieved from the University of Mississippi's Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness and Planning (IREP). Principal investigators for this research project will facilitate the request for internal data for MOST participants. A data request form is available for public and campus access through the IREP website. In order to provide a well-rounded and robust sample size, two years of MOST cohorts will be used in this study. MOST cohorts will be analyzed for their first-year success during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 academic year. The participants in this study will be from the state of Mississippi, have various academic majors and attended a MOST Conference during the summer of 2015 or summer 2016. The request for data will include MOST and Non-MOST participants' first-semester and second-semester GPAs.

The African American students who make up the MOST cohorts will be analyzed to determine if their academic success is better than their counterparts who did not attend the MOST Conference. The 2016-2017 cohort has 129 and the 2017-2018 cohort has 99 MOST participants who identify as African American. This provides us with a sample size of 228 MOST participants and a comparison group of 546 Non-MOST, African American first-year students. The combined 546 Non-MOST students will include the remaining 265 and 281 in-state, first-year African American students who respectively enrolled at the University during the

fall 2016 and fall 2017 semesters. By further examining the previous research and current data, a statistical analysis of the proposed questions would be impactful for the research. Given current data for two cohorts of the MOST Conference is available, this provides a substantive sample size to test the proposed questions. Using an Independent Sample T-test, we will compare the average first semester and first-year GPAs of MOST and non-MOST participants. Additionally, we will use a Dependent T-test, to determine if there is a significant difference in the average first semester GPA and second semester GPA for MOST participants. For the MOST participants, attending the pre-admission conference as rising high school seniors and fostering a connection to the MOST Mentoring Program as freshman should be advantageous to their success. This assumption is the basis for exploring our research questions through statistical analysis.

The primary research questions will be addressed through the collection and analysis of quantitative data. However, to better understand the academic experiences of MOST participants and to make future recommendations for enhancing the MOST Program when possible, existing survey data may be used. For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a national survey used to gauge first-year students' participation in high-impact practices at universities and colleges in North America. This trend data may be beneficial in describing how students' engagement is connected to academic efficacy at the University of Mississippi as compared to peer institutions. In addition, since 2015, post-event surveys have been administered to students who attended the MOST Conference. The qualitative data collected in the surveys capture respondents' perspectives on the MOST Conference, including a positive sense of belonging and intent to enroll at the University of Mississippi.

For example, the following statements were taken verbatim from survey respondents in 2016 and 2017 and exemplify respondents' sentiments:

1. "It was great. My groups leaders were really great and taught you a lot about Ole Miss. I love how they still keep in touch with you after the conference!" (2016 MOST Conference Participant)
2. "I think this is a very great conference that the university has going on. I feel really proud and honored to be invited and to attend the conference. It made me realize a lot of things about myself and my future. I am so glad I had two caring and friendly mentors for those days. I wish the conference was more than just three days because it seemed to fly by." (2016 MOST Conference Participant)
3. "They had more African Americans than I thought." (2017 MOST Conference Participant)
4. "The [Black Student Union] and the other [Black] organizations are there to welcome and serve purpose with black students." (2017 MOST Conference Participant)

While the above responses provide feedback about the conference experience, additional analysis of the mid-semester and end-of-year surveys administered through Qualtrics by the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement to MOST 2015 and MOST 2016 participants may provide descriptive detail on the first-year experiences of African American students at the University of Mississippi, including classroom experiences that may enhance or inhibit MOST students' academic success.

Proposed Methods for Examining and Collecting Data

The key principal investigators of this research are affiliated with the University of Mississippi. This allows easy access to the data but also presents ethical issues. The institutional

data that will be accessible for this research will be obtained through IREP. The Institutional Review Board approval is essential in order to protect data for this research project. By further examining the data provided through IREP, we will be able to answer our preliminary research questions through statistical analysis.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

In Manuscript One, we have identified a complex problem of practice related to African American student success in higher education, specifically at the University of Mississippi. The problem of practice was examined through the lens of scholarly literature, Bean and Eaton's Model of Student Retention, and the CPED First principles of equity, ethics, and social justice. We also shared our professional positionality and assumptions influencing the present research inquiry. Manuscript One ended with the identification of research questions and proposed methodology. As we move forward with the remaining manuscripts, we will continue to explore the relationship of first-year African American students participating in the Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent (MOST) Program and their academic success.

In Manuscript Two, the existing and new data is interpreted. Challenges, limitations, and ethical considerations related to data collection are further discussed. Manuscript Two concludes with a presentation of findings and implications for the problem of practice. In addition to providing a summary of the first two manuscripts, Manuscript Three offers a discussion of relevant programmatic changes or revisions in policy and practice. Seeking to fulfill the CPED First principles of equity, ethics, and social justice, the final manuscript also delivers plans for disseminating key findings and recommendations.

LIST OF REFERENCES

References

- 2007-2008 Mini fact book. (n.d.) University of Mississippi website. Retrieved from <https://irep.olemiss.edu/institutional-research/quick-facts/fall-2007-2008-enrollment/>.
- 2017-2018 Mini fact book. (n.d.) University of Mississippi website. Retrieved from https://irep.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/98/2018/02/Mini-Fact-Book-in-Excel_2017-2018.pdf.
- Aljohani, O. (2016). A comprehensive review of the major studies and theoretical models of student retention in higher education. *Higher Education Studies*, 6(2), 1-18.
- Andrews, J. (2009, September 17). *Searching for what is right 50 years later: Symposium honors Clyde Kennard half a century after his application to the university was denied*. Retrieved from <http://www.studentprintz.com/news/searching-for-what-is-right-50-years-later-1.477353>
- Astin, A. (2005). Making sense out of degree completion rates. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 7, 1-2, 5-17.
- Ballard, M. (2008). *Maroon and white: Mississippi State University, 1878-2003*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Bir, B., & Myrick, M. (2015). Summer bridge's effects on college student success. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 39(1), 22-28.
- Black student college graduation rates remain low, but modest progress begins to show. (2006). *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (50), 88-96.
- Bonney, J. (1965, July 20). MSU mixing goes quietly. *Clarion Ledger*, pp. 1, 14.

- Bean, J. P., & Eaton, S. B. (2000). A psychological model of college student retention. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp.48-61). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bean, J. P. (2005). Nine themes of college student retention. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success*, (pp. 215-244). Westport, CT: Prager Publishers.
- Boatright-Horowitz, S. L., Frazier, S., Harps-Logan, Y., & Crockett, N. (2013). Difficult times for college students of color: Teaching White students about white privilege provides hope for change. *Teaching In Higher Education*, 18(7), 698-708.
- Brower, A. M. (1994). Measuring student performances and performance appraisals with the College Life Task Assessment Instrument. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience*, 6(2), 7-36.
- Cartledge, B. H., Baldwin, M. S., Persall, J. M., & Woolley, T. W. (2015). College choice determinants of African-American enrollment at a private college. *Journal of Academic Administration in Higher Education*, 11(1), 1-8.
- CICCE about us. (n.d.) University of Mississippi website. Retrieved from <https://inclusion.olemiss.edu/core-values/>.
- CPED initiative about us. (n.d.). The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate website. Retrieved from <https://www.cpedinitiative.org/page/AboutUs>.
- Davis, D. J. (2010). The academic influence of mentoring upon African American undergraduate aspirants to the professoriate. *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, 42(2), 143-158.

- Diversity matters: The University of Mississippi's diversity plan. (2013). University of Mississippi website. Retrieved from <http://diversity.olemiss.edu/>.
- Eagles, C. W. (2009). *The price of defiance: James Meredith and the integration of Ole Miss*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.
- Eakins, A., & Eakins, S. L. (2017). African American students at predominantly white institutions: A collaborative style cohort recruitment & retention model. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education*, 13(2), 51-57.
- Embrick, D. G., Brusma, D. L., & Thomas, J. T. (2016, August 25). Campuses as racial utopias? *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/08/25/college-leaders-often-deny-racial-tensions-their-own-institutions-essay>
- Fall enrollment trends (n.d.). UM tableau. Retrieved from https://tableau.olemiss.edu/#/views/FallEnrollmentTrends_0/Demographics?:iid=2
- Fischer, M. J. (2007). Settling into campus life: Differences by race/ethnicity in college involvement and outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education*, 78(2), 125-161.
- Flagship forward: The strategic plan of the University of Mississippi. (2018). University of Mississippi website. Retrieved from <http://flagshipforward.olemiss.edu/>.
- Grier-Reed, T., Madyun, N., & Buckley, C. (2008). Low Black student retention on a predominantly white campus: Two faculty respond with the African American student network. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(5), 476-485.
- Gurin, P., Dey, E., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(3), 330-367.

- Harper, S. R., & Hurtado, S. (2011). Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. In S. R. Harper, J. F. Jackson, & A. E. Austin (Eds.), *Introduction to American higher education* (pp. 278-291). New York: Routledge.
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *Journal of Higher Education*, 80(4), 389-414.
- Harwood, S. A., Choi, S., Orozco, M., Browne Hunt, M., & Mendenhall, R. (2015). Racial microaggressions at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: Voices of students of color in the classroom. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Harwood, S. A., Hunt, M. B., Mendenhall, R., & Lewis, J. A. (2012). Racial microaggressions in the residence halls: Experiences of students of color at a predominantly white university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5(3), 159-173.
- Johnson, L. (2013). The benefits of a comprehensive retention program for African American students at a predominantly white university. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 3(1), 38-54.
- Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Tay, D., Capelin, E., & Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students. A study of strategies for retention. *Australian Universities' Review*, 55(2), 5-14.
- Luther, C., & Gallant, J. (2016). *Ole Miss students occupy Lyceum to protest student's racist comments*. Retrieved from <http://www.wmactionnews5.com/story/33168134/ole-miss-students-occupy-lyceum-to-protest-students-racist-comments/>

- McCallum, C. M. (2016). "Mom made me do it": The role of family in African Americans' decisions to enroll in doctoral education. *Journal of Diversity In Higher Education*, 9(1), 50-63.
- Negro student enrolled at state's summer course. (1965, July 20). *Greenwood Commonwealth*.
- Newton, B. C., Ghee, K. L., & Langmeyer, D. (2014). Correlates of African-American undergraduate student achievement: Implications for the prize initiative. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 15(4), 605-631.
- Retention, graduation, and student success (n.d.). UM tableau. Retrieved from <https://tableau.olemiss.edu/#/views/RetentionGraduationandStudentSuccess/GraduationTrends?:iid=1>.
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.
- Rodgers, K. A., & Summers, J. J. (2008). African American students at predominantly white institutions: A motivational and self-systems approach to understanding retention. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20(2), 171-190.
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *Journal of Negro Education*, 80(1), 63-82.
- Solorzano, D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60-73.

- [UC Davis School of Education]. (2014, May 8). Daniel Solorzano: Microaggressions and everyday racism. [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JU4294fZNA>.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). Satisfaction and retention among African American men at two-year community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(5), 358-375.
- Sue, D. W., & Constantine, M. G. (2007). Racial microaggressions as instigators of difficult dialogues on race: Implications for student affairs educators and students. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 26(2), 136-143.
- Svrluga, S. (2016). Former Ole Miss student pleads guilty to hanging noose around statue honoring the first black student. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/03/24/former-ole-miss-student-pleads-guilty-to-hanging-noose-around-statue-honoring-the-first-black-student/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.22d0c835331f
- Talbert, P. Y. (2012). Strategies to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 36(1), 22-24.
- Thelin, J. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd Ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

- Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflection on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59, 438-455.
- van Laar, C. (2005). The paradox of high self-esteem in African American students: An attributional account. *Educational Psychology Review*, 12, 33-61.
- University of Mississippi. (2010, November). *UM 2020 Strategic Plan* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://irep.wp.olemiss.edu/wpcontent/uploads/sites/154/2014/07/UM2020Report.pdf>.
- Willett, M. (1997, February 26). First African-American MSU student recounts his academic beginning. *Commercial Dispatch*.

MANUSCRIPT TWO

CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Historically, African Americans have faced barriers to accessing higher education (Thelin, 2004; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Because of the systemic and institutionalized efforts to limit access, the enrollment and persistence of African American students continues to be a complex issue in higher education. As the flagship institution in the state, the University of Mississippi has a regrettable past and continues to experience the effects of its segregationist history (Eagles, 2009). Despite institutional strides to increase access and create a more welcoming campus, African American student graduation rates are significantly lower than White student rates (Retention, Graduation and Student Success, n.d.). In 2018, the University reported an average four-year graduation rate of 49.7% for White students compared to only 25.9% for African American students. Likewise, the six-year graduation rate for White students is 64.2% and only 42.4% for African American students. Because first-year academic success is critical for graduation of African American students, universities must evaluate the effectiveness of various recruitment and retention initiatives (Astin, 2005; Eakins & Eakins, 2017). In this Dissertation in Practice (DiP), we have identified the academic success of first-year African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) like the University of Mississippi as a pressing problem of practice. We believe improving the academic performance of African American students during the first year at the University of Mississippi will enhance graduation outcomes.

Early intervention, pre-admission programs play a role in lessening the barriers to enrollment and persistence in higher education (Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Johnson, 2013). The Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent (MOST) Program is the University's early intervention effort to recruit and retain African American students from the state of Mississippi. An understanding of the success of MOST participants during their first year at the University will have implications for improving overall retention and graduation rates of African American students.

The MOST Program consists of three components—the MOST Conference, the MOST Reunion, and the MOST Mentoring Program. The MOST Conference, held in the summer, targets African American rising high school seniors from the state of Mississippi. During the conference, attendees participate in educational workshops, social activities, and small group meetings. MOST Mentors guide students through the conference experience, and continue to provide support during the students' senior year of high school. All attendees are invited back to campus the following November for the MOST Reunion that provides a more in-depth opportunity to experience college life. For those students who enroll at the University, they continue to receive support from the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement during the first year through the MOST Mentoring Program.

MOST Conference participants have consistently shared their positive feedback regarding the three-day, two-night pre-college experience. According to post-conference evaluations administered by the Center for Inclusion & Cross Cultural Engagement, approximately 98% of high school seniors participating in the MOST 2015 Conference described the experience as "amazing" and one that they would "highly recommend" to their peers. The following are some direct quotes from participants:

1. "This was an amazing experience and I really enjoyed it. This conference has kind of given me an idea of what college life is about here at Ole Miss and it was life changing. I've learned so much here within these 3 days and I will use all of these skills when I come to Ole Miss in fall of 2016. This conference was so fun and I recommend you extend it to 5 days next year."
2. "The conference was great. I enjoyed everything and I was engaged. It was challenging. It was alive and I felt a family vibe. I actually want to continue the relationship amongst my classmates, mentors, and the other leaders of this great university. I am really considering this college as my future choice because it has infinite possibilities. Thank you for having me and you WILL see me in the fall. Are You Ready??"

These testimonials and feedback have been both refreshing and validating for the MOST Conference Planning Committee and administrators. However, once the excitement of the conference ends and students navigate their first year at the University, it is currently unclear if MOST participants are achieving academically, particularly at a rate that is higher than African American students who do not attend the conference.

In this manuscript, we will explore the academic success of first-year African American students who participated in the 2015 and 2016 MOST Conference and respectively enrolled at the University of Mississippi during the Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 semesters. Those students who participated in the MOST Conference are described as *MOST participants*. The comparison group, those who did not participate in the conference, are described as *Non-MOST participants*. The Non-MOST participants are African American students who are also residents of the state of Mississippi. Furthermore, we define *academic success* by the grade point average earned during the students' first year at the University of Mississippi

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to determine if the MOST Conference contributes to the academic success of first-year African American students at the University of Mississippi. Thus, the following research questions are explored:

1. Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first semester GPA* than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?
2. Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first-year GPA* than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?
3. During their first year at the University of Mississippi, do MOST participants earn a higher average first semester GPA than second semester GPA?

Receiving over 800 applications for the 2017 MOST Conference, the MOST Program has become increasingly popular on the University of Mississippi's campus and across the state (Smith, 2018). Given our roles as members of the MOST Conference planning committee and as scholar-practitioners, we have a stake in the success of the MOST Program. Johnson (2013) concluded early intervention and first-year mentoring programs lead to higher retention and graduation rates for African American students. Given their early access to campus resources, mentoring relationships, and sense of belonging, we believe MOST students are well positioned to successfully navigate the campus. Thus, we hypothesize MOST participants will earn a higher average first semester and first-year GPA than other first-year African American students who did not participate in the program. We also hypothesize MOST participants will earn a higher average GPA during their first semester as compared to their second semester.

Professional Positionality

As scholar-practitioners who attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and currently employed at the University of Mississippi, we are interested in improving graduation rates for African American students. Grier-Reed et al. (2008) highlighted the disparities in enrollment and persistence rates of African Americans compared to White students. Additionally, Newton et al. (2014) found the six-year graduation rate for African American students attending four-year institutions is statistically lower than the rates for their White counterparts. Through our professional roles at the University of Mississippi, we have witnessed the gap in degree completion for African American students. We also work closely with the MOST Conference, MOST Reunion, and MOST Mentoring Program. Shawnboda Mead is the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Diversity at the University of Mississippi. Mead served as co-chair of the MOST Conference Planning Committee for four years and led the effort to restructure the MOST Program to its current model. Alexandria White is the Interim Director of the Center for Inclusion & Cross Cultural Engagement. White has been an active member of the MOST Conference Planning Committee for three years and has been responsible for expanding the MOST Mentoring Program. EJ Presley is the Assistant Director of Career Development in the University's Career Center. Presley has been an active member of the MOST Conference Planning Committee and engaged with students through the delivery of workshops during the conference.

In addition to our conviction gleaned from personal and professional experiences, a survey of literature has led us to feel a greater urgency in improving the academic success of first-year African American students. The amplified understanding of the academic performance of MOST participants will serve as a gateway for enhancing the MOST Program and better

serving other African American students. Given our roles on the MOST Conference Planning Committee, we have knowledge of the program's successes regarding application and enrollment numbers. However, we seek to answer a critical question: Does the MOST Program contribute to the academic success of participants during their first year at the University of Mississippi?

CPED First Principles

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) First Principles of equity, ethics, and social justice will serve as a guide for our research. In this section, we will explore the academic success of first-year African American students attending PWIs through the lens of equity, ethics, and social justice.

As scholar-practitioners, we cannot ignore the historical and institutionalized inequities that exist for African Americans in pursuit of higher education. The effects of exclusivity, racial inequality, and discrimination on access and success are lasting (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013; Harper & Hurtado, 2011; Solorzano et al., 2000). From an equity lens, we must consider the barriers MOST Program students had to overcome in order to enroll at the University of Mississippi. As we are defining academic success by the average grade point average, we must also consider external factors that might have influenced the students' academic performance. Additionally, identifying potential barriers to persistence from the first semester to the second semester will contribute to improving longer-term graduation outcomes. Likewise, the removal of systemic barriers preventing the enrollment and persistence of African American students must be addressed.

Historically, race-based restrictions have been imposed on African American students seeking higher education (Thelin, 2004). From an ethics lens, the University of Mississippi has a moral obligation to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. A strong

sense of belonging is a key factor in persistence and academic success (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). According to participant surveys completed by the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement, MOST Program participants have articulated a sense of belonging. The University of Mississippi must commit to a campus environment free from discrimination. A better understanding of the MOST Program's effectiveness might reveal strategies for promoting greater academic success for African American students as well as enhancing the campus climate.

A social justice lens moves institutions beyond compliance to correcting social inequities. If there are significant differences in the academic success of MOST students as it compares to Non-MOST students, this research makes the case for reducing barriers and allocating resources for the MOST Program as well as similar initiatives. Pre-admission early intervention programs such as the MOST Conference positively influence retention and persistence (Johnson, 2013). The end result of improved retention outcomes are also more African American students graduating and post-graduation employment (Harper et al., 2009; Harper & Hurtado, 2011). Therefore, an investment in such programs is critical to the overall success of African American students in higher education.

Conceptual Frameworks

Bean and Eaton's (2000) Psychological Model of Student Retention was used as the theoretical framework for this research. This framework was useful because it provides a longitudinal model that links psychological processes to retention. The model also accounts for students' intentions and environmental factors. According to Bean and Eaton's (2000) model, a student's entry characteristics such as motivations to attend and skills and abilities influence their bureaucratic, academic, social, and external interactions with the campus. Because of these

interactions, the student develops attitudes about institutional fit that ultimately influences their decision to persist. Bean and Eaton's model also accounts for the ways in which academic integration and performance as well as social integration influence retention. Additionally, Bean (2005) identified academics as one of nine components impacting retention.

Rodgers and Summers (2008) built upon Bean and Eaton's model and developed the revised model of retention for African American students at PWIs. The revised model accounted for cultural differences that are present for African American students. Of most importance to this research, Rodgers and Summers (2008) concluded African American students' attitudes about their academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging influenced their decisions to persist. As a primary recruitment and retention initiative for African American students at the University of Mississippi, the MOST Program has the potential to positively impact students' academic performance and belongingness. Both frameworks were key in selecting our focus on the academic success of African American students at PWIs. We will continue to use the frameworks as guides to understanding the research findings and determining implications for policy and practice. In the next section, we will discuss a thorough examination of retention, limitations, challenges, and further considerations for the data.

CHAPTER II: DATA EXPLORATION

The researchers of this study are scholar-practitioners who work closely with the MOST Program. Because of this proximity, following institutional rules for collecting and quantifying this data was essential. Therefore, a detailed Institutional Review Board application was submitted in order to acquire permission for us of the quantitative data needed for this research project. Consistent with ethical protocol, the data was requested by the principal investigators from the Registrar's Office and the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning (IREP) to adequately complete the project.

This Dissertation in Practice explored the academic success of attendees of the MOST Conference. These attendees eventually enrolled at the University of Mississippi and were classified as matriculating students. First-year African American students who did not attend the MOST Conference serve as the comparison group. Once the preliminary questions were identified, we began the process of selecting and collecting data to support or refute the research questions. These questions include inquiry about first semester GPA (i.e. Do MOST participants earn a higher average first semester GPA than other first-year African American students?); first-year GPA (i.e. Do MOST participants earn a higher average first year GPA than other first-year African American students?); and MOST participants overall academic success during the first semester compared to the second semester. The questions were analyzed by internal data collected by the University of Mississippi.

In order to provide anonymity to the target populations, the principal investigators requested that the data be provided to us as unidentifiable for statistical analysis. Through email communication, the University Registrar approved the use of data with unidentifiable characteristics. However, certain characteristics needed to be collected in order to process the study. Those indicators included: African American status; attended the University of Mississippi during the Fall 2015 and Fall 2016 academic school year; and attended the MOST Conference. IREP provided the data which included the requested indicators (e.g. enrollment year, MOST vs. Non-MOST participant, first semester and second semester GPA, first year GPA) needed for analysis. Due to some irregularities interpreting the findings, we later collected transfer GPAs, as well as enrollment in summer or intersession courses and GPAs for those courses for both the MOST and Non-MOST groups.

Retention Data

Because MOST participants make up approximately 30% of African American students in the first-year class, measuring their academic success will aid in improving overall retention and graduation outcomes for African American students at the University (Smith, 2018). The following charts from the University's *Cohort Info by Cohort Year with Special Status* UM Tableau dashboard showcases the retention of the selected cohorts for this study. Figure 2.1 indicates that African American students who attended the 2015 MOST Conference and enrolled as Freshman in the Fall 2016 were retained at 88.37%. In comparison, Figure 2.2 indicates that Non-MOST students who enrolled as Freshman in the Fall 2016 were only retained at 82.64%. In order to provide a more robust study, the principal investigators also selected the Fall 2017 cohort for analysis. Figure 2.3 indicates that African American students who attended the 2016 MOST Conference and enrolled as Freshman in the Fall 2017 were retained at 87.88%. In

comparison, Figure 2.4 indicates that Non-MOST students who enrolled as Freshman in the Fall 2017 were only retained at 79.64%. The retention rates for MOST participants can likely be attributed to involvement in the MOST Program. The following charts highlight that retention rates are greater for students who attended the MOST Conference than those who did not.

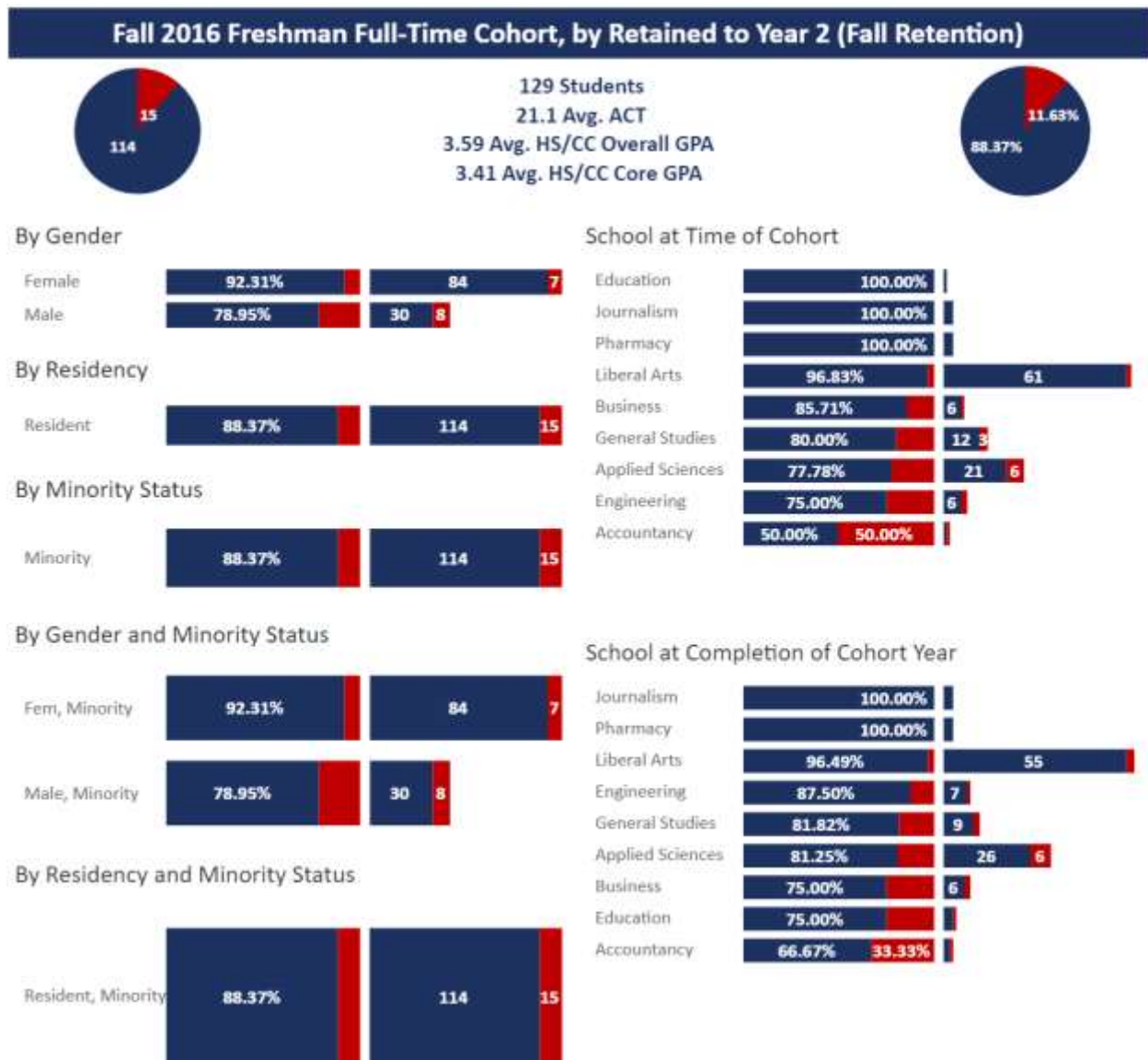


Figure 2.1. First-Year Retention of MOST 2015 Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016

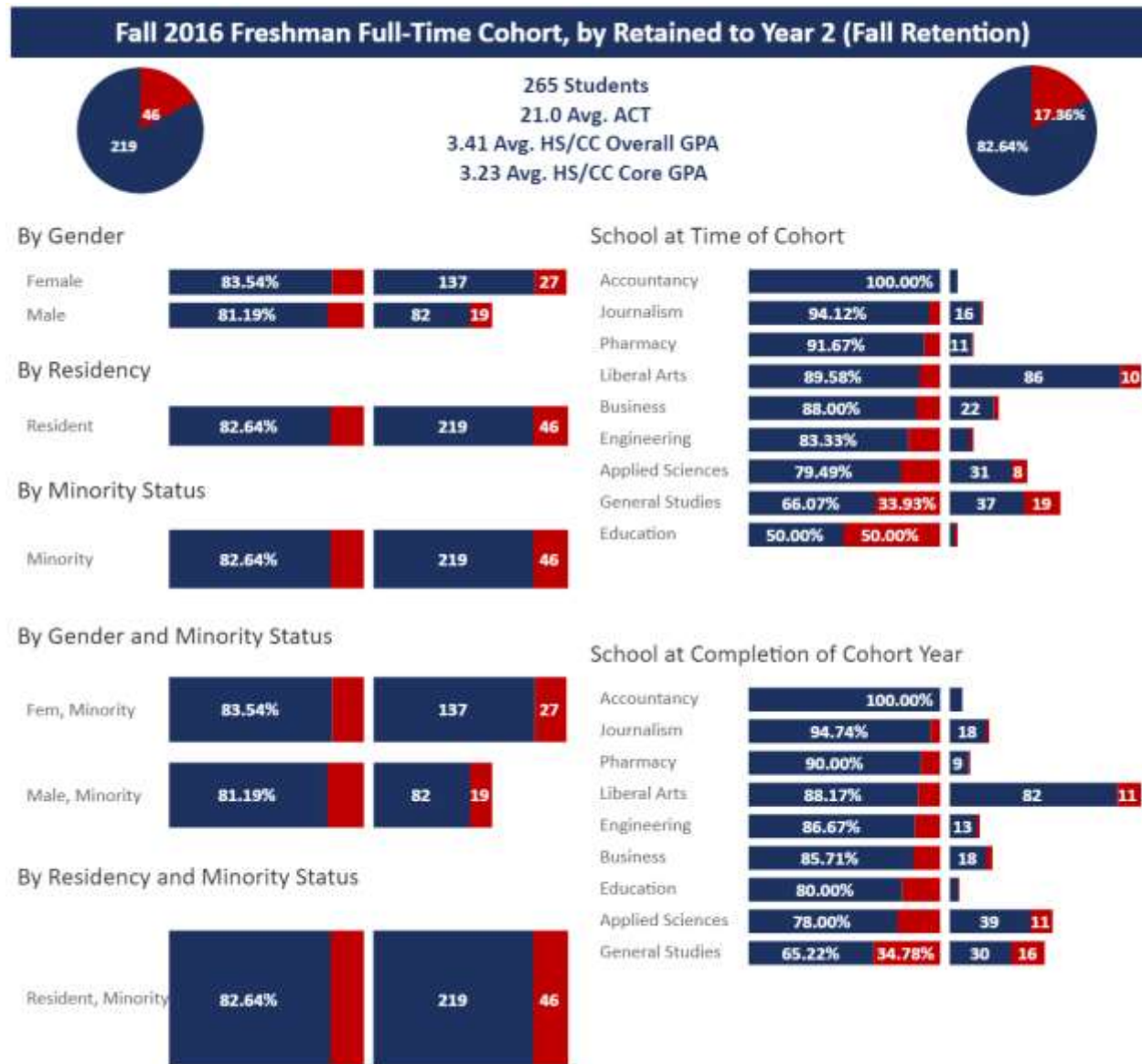


Figure 2.2. First-Year Retention of Non-MOST Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016

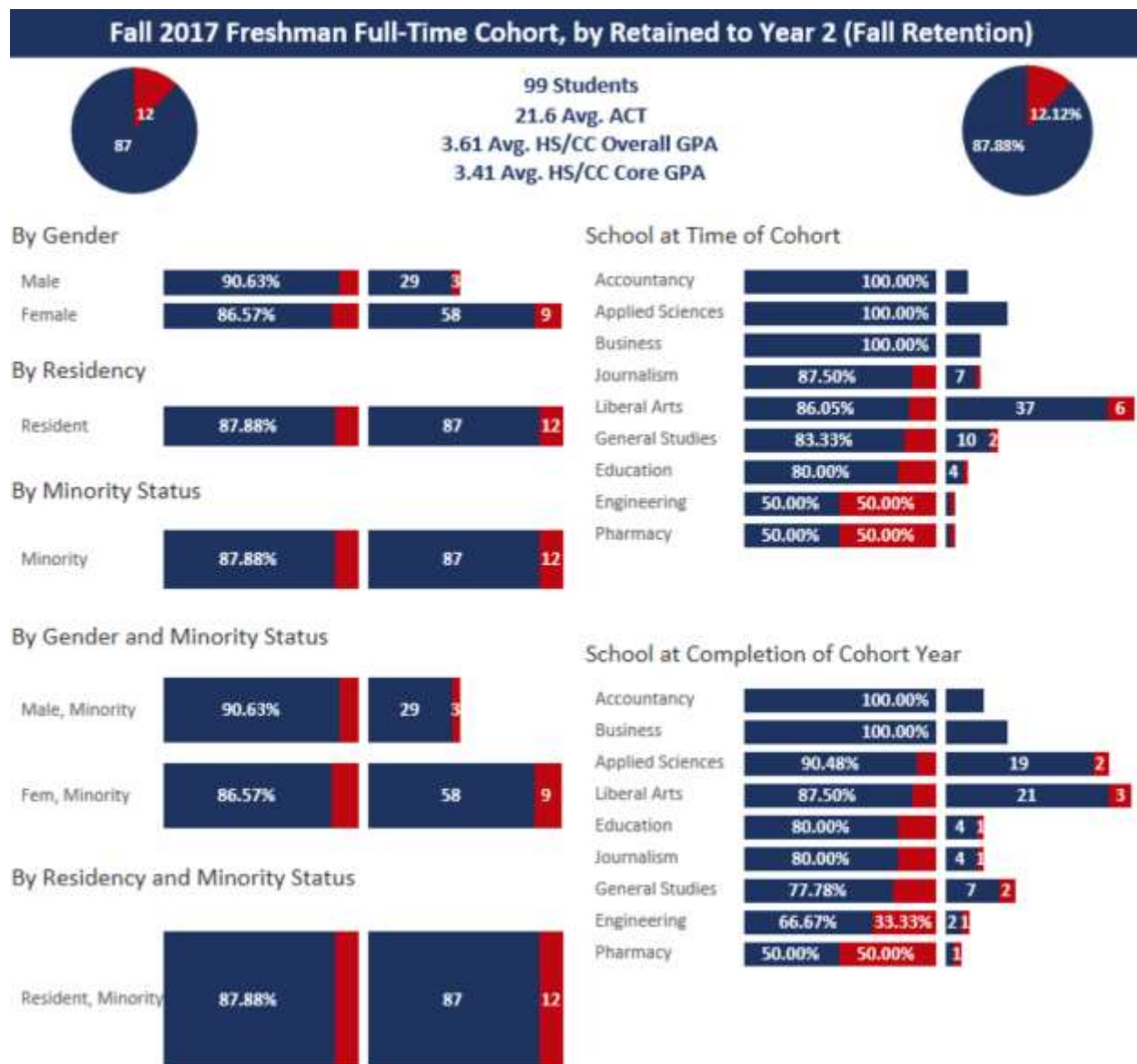


Figure 2.3. First-Year Retention of MOST 2016 Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2017

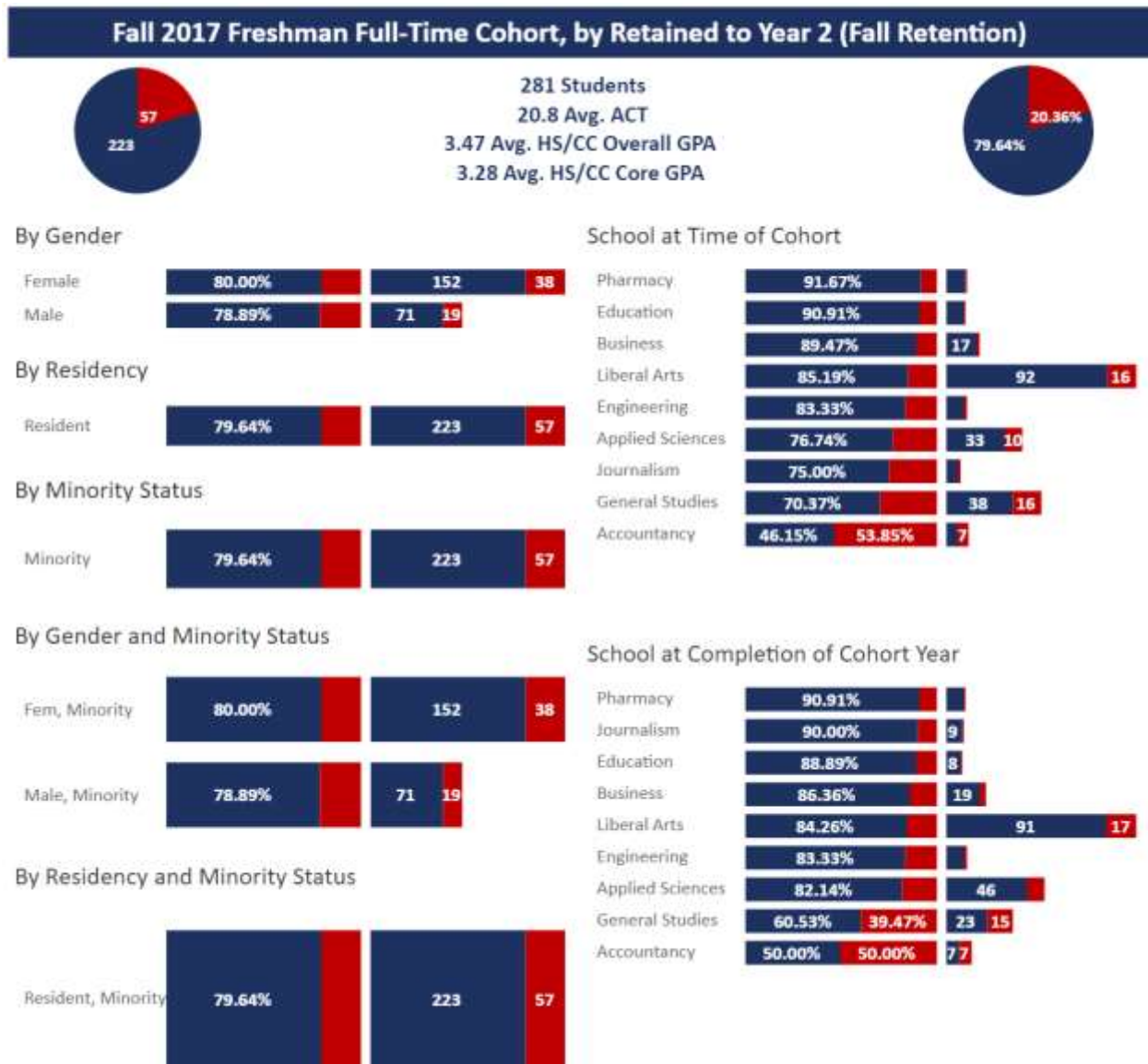


Figure 2.4. First-Year Retention of Non-MOST Participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2017

Additional Data

In an effort to gauge the success of the MOST Conference, the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement distributed participant surveys to attendees of the MOST Conference. These surveys were distributed mid-semester of the first year to participants who had attended the MOST Conference and enrolled at the University of Mississippi. This data provided a glimpse into some of the students' experiences in higher education. Mid-semester

evaluations were given to the 2015 and 2016 cohorts to assess their acclimation to the University of Mississippi. The responses revealed the importance of a sense of belonging that is consistent with the revised model of retention for African American students at PWIs (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Aspects of this model are reflected in the responses from MOST attendees who were matriculating students at the University of Mississippi. For example, the following statements were taken verbatim from first-year African American students who attended the MOST Conference. When asked, *What have you enjoyed most about being at the University of Mississippi?*; students shared the following:

1. It's a great environment within itself. It screams fresh start (2015 MOST Conference Participant)
2. All the different opportunities to get involved and be apart of something (2015 MOST Conference Participant)
3. I've enjoyed the atmosphere and the people (2015 MOST Conference Participant)
4. Meeting new people from different places (2016 MOST Conference Participant)
5. The atmosphere, the students, the sense of family (2016 MOST Conference Participant)
6. Support group that I was promised at MOST, I received it! I love that although I have to work hard, I have people ready to assist me or direct me to someone who can assist me (2016 MOST Conference Participant)

The above statements are supported by the findings from the 2004 & 2012 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). According to these reports, students from traditionally disadvantaged groups rate their positive interactions with students, advisors, and faculty as being critical to their persistence (NSSE 2004; NSSE 2012). The above statements are supported by the findings from the 2004 & 2012 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). According

to these reports, students from traditionally disadvantaged groups rate their positive interactions with students, advisors and faculty as being critical to their persistence (NSSE 2004; NSSE 2012). The MOST Mentoring Program provides opportunities for these interactions post-enrollment at the University of Mississippi. In addition, the National Survey of Student Engagement also High-Impact Practices (HIPs), these are defined as experiences on campus that enhance the student learning experience. They can include positive interactions, events outside of the classroom and enjoying being around a diverse group of people (NSSE, 2017). The internal survey data and national survey data suggested that the MOST Program was positively impacting African American student success at the University of Mississippi. The statements from students, the retention data, and NSSE survey responses, coupled with the GPA data, offer a comprehensive view for understanding the first-year success of African American students at the University of Mississippi.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

To quantitatively analyze the results collected from the SPSS statistical analysis of our three research questions, we will employ the use of graphs and SPSS output display to aid in the presentation of the results. To provide context for our research question analysis, the research questions are restated below:

1. Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first semester* GPA than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?
2. Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first-year* GPA than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?
3. During their first year at the University of Mississippi, do MOST participants earn a higher average first semester GPA than second semester GPA?

To analyze research questions one and two, we utilized the Independent T-test Model. For question three, we utilized the Dependent T-test Model also known as the Paired Sample T-test Model. The purpose of using the Independent T-test Model for question one and two is that the research question seeks to compare GPAs of two independent groups (MOST vs. Non-MOST). According to Liu, Loudermilk, & Simpson (2014), the Independent T-test is “often used to compare the outcome performance between a treatment group and a control group” (p. 95). The purpose of employing the Dependent T-test Model for question three is that the research question

seeks to compare the GPAs of a related group (MOST participants) on separate occasions. Liu et al., (2014) confirmed the Dependent T-test is used to analyze “matched pairs or a group of subjects that have been tested twice” (p. 93).

Data Analysis

The data utilized for this study consisted of 228 MOST participants and 547 Non-MOST participants that were enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and 2017. Table 2.1 denotes the mean GPAs for MOST and Non-MOST participants during the first semester and first year. The first year GPA, shown in Figure one, includes all transfer GPAs prior to enrollment, winter intersession GPAs during the first year, and all summer terms GPAs after the first year of enrollment. Table 2.2 displays mean GPA data for MOST participants with both first and second semester GPAs enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and 2017. During this analysis, we utilized only the 228 MOST participants.

	First Semester Grade Point Averages (GPA)	First Year Grade Point Averages (GPA)
MOST Participants (n=228)	2.5785	2.4995
Non-MOST Participants (n=547)	2.4991	2.4224

Table 2.1. The first semester GPA and first-year GPA for African American MOST and Non-MOST participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and Fall 2017.

	First Semester Grade Point Averages (GPA)	Second Semester Grade Point Averages (GPA)
MOST Participants (n=228)	2.5785	2.2391

Table 2.2. The first semester GPA and second semester GPA for African American MOST participants who enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and Fall 2017.

MOST participants are defined as first-year African American students who attended the MOST summer conference in 2015 and 2016, as well as enrolled at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and 2017. Non-MOST participants are defined as first-year African American students who did not attend the MOST Conference, but did enroll at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and 2017. Below, researchers will provide the statistical analysis for each research question.

Research Question 1.

- Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first semester* GPA than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?

Group Statistics					
	Most	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
FallGPA	Y	228	2.5785	.91886	.06085
	N	547	2.4991	1.03007	.04404

Table 2.3. Descriptive statistics for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-MOST participants

Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
FallGPA	Equal variances assumed	6.964	.008	1.008	773	.314	.07936	.07873	-.07518 .23390
	Equal variances not assumed			1.056	473.130	.291	.07936	.07512	-.06825 .22697

* Alpha level of .05%

Table 2.4. Independent Sample T-test for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-Most participants

Table 2.3 indicates that the mean first semester fall GPA scores of MOST participants (Y) is higher (M= 2.57) than Non-MOST participants (N) (M=2.49). As noted in Table 2.1, we analyzed 228 MOST participants and 547 Non-MOST participants' GPAs. Table 2.4 provides a significance value for the Levene Test for Equal Variances that is less than the Alpha level of .05% (Sig = .008). Therefore, we will reject the null hypothesis and equal variances are not assumed. The significant value for the T-test for Equality of Means is greater than the Alpha level of .05% (Sig =.291). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis and the difference in GPA scores is not statistically significant.

Research Question 2.

- Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first-year* GPA than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi?

Group Statistics					
	Most	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
FirstYear	Y	228	2.4995	.84064	.05567
	N	547	2.4224	.93457	.03996

Table 2.5. Descriptive statistics for comparing first-year 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-MOST participants

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
FirstYear	Equal variances assumed	3.646	.057	1.077	773	.282	.07707	.07158	-.06344	.21758
	Equal variances not assumed			1.125	469.345	.261	.07707	.06853	-.05759	.21173

* Alpha level of .05%

Table 2.6. Independent Sample T-test for comparing first-year 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants vs. Non-MOST participants

Table 2.5 indicates that the first-year GPA score of MOST participants (Y) are higher (M= 2.49) than Non-MOST participants (M=2.42). As noted in Table 2.1, we analyzed 228 MOST participants and 547 Non-MOST participants' GPAs. Table 2.6 provides a significance value for the Levene Test for Equal Variances that is greater than the Alpha level of .05% (Sig = .057). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis and assume equal variances. The significant value for the T-test for Equality of Means is greater than the Alpha level of .05% (Sig=.282). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis and the difference in GPA scores is not statistically significant.

Research Question 3.

- During their first-year at the University of Mississippi, do MOST participants earn a higher average first semester GPA than second semester GPA?

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	FallMOST	2.5785	228	.91886	.06085
	SpringMOST	2.2391	228	1.10577	.07323

Table 2.7. Descriptive statistics for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs and second semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	FallMOST - SpringMOST	.33934	.81917	.05425	.23244	.44624	6.255	227	.000

* Alpha level of .05%

Table 2.8. Paired Sample T-test for comparing first semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs and second semester 2016 and 2017 GPAs for MOST participants

Table 2.7 demonstrates the mean of first semester GPAs (2.57) and second semester GPAs (2.23) of students that were enrolled in the first and second semester. As noted in Table 2.2, we analyzed 228 MOST participants' GPAs. The mean of the first semester is greater than the second semester. Table 2.8 indicates a significant value that is less than the Alpha level of .05% (Sig = .000). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and the difference in first semester GPAs and second semester GPAs is statistically significant.

Limitations of the Data

The available data was sufficient for analyzing the preliminary questions. However, there were some limitations to the data. It was collected based on non-identifiable factors except that students did or did not attend the MOST Conference. The data did not account for entry

characteristics such as high school GPA, Pell Grant eligibility, parental support, or high school involvement that may influence student success (Bean & Eaton, 2000). The data also did not account for gender, socioeconomic status, first generation status, or any other aspects of identity. Rowser (1997) found that both Black and White students succeed in their first year of college. Yet, the data only included GPAs of African American students. Nevertheless, the data helped answer the preliminary questions because it allowed the researchers to assess if academic success was more likely for students who attended the MOST Conference compared to those who did not. A more robust data set would allow for additional analysis and the ability to draw conclusions based on various aspects of identity and specific characteristics.

Challenges Interpreting Data

The primary challenges arose in the analysis of the first-year GPA. We did not previously consider the presence of transfer GPAs earned prior to enrollment at the University of Mississippi or the enrollment in summer or intersession courses. Both the transfer GPAs and summer and/or winter session GPAs influenced the first-year GPA. Because not all students in the MOST and Non-MOST groups enroll in courses before or beyond the fall and spring semester, there were some challenges interpreting the data. Additional challenges were associated with participants not all having a recorded first semester or second semester GPA. These irregularities in data reporting for some participants left for a gap in the output of data. Finally, there were challenges related to the identification of MOST participants as African American students. While the MOST program does target African American students, there are other students of color who have participated in the program and enrolled at the University of Mississippi. These challenges will be discussed in greater depth in the *Summary of Results* (p. 78-79) section.

Further Considerations

Our study focused on the academic success of students who attended the MOST Conference. We identified participants based on their involvement in the MOST Conference in comparison to first-year African American students who did not attend the MOST Conference. As mentioned earlier, the newly designed MOST Conference was started in 2015. A convenient sample size of 228 was used for the selected 2015 and 2016 cohorts. The overall sample size was limited to the selected cohorts. This study does not account for the third MOST cohort who are currently enrolled as freshmen and attended MOST 2017. Additionally, it would have been beneficial to see how the GPAs of MOST participants compared to the University's overall student population.

In future research, there could be an examination of how each cohort compared in academic success based on major. A thorough look into academic success based on majors of MOST attendees could be a point for further research. Understanding the academic history of African American students at a predominantly White institution based on majors would be beneficial for institutional purposes. In addition, a detailed look into grade point averages based on gender could be used as a model for research. The data requested in this study did not show gender, hometown, major or any other identifiable aspect of the participants.

Overall, the limitations of the data can be the basis for further research to help expand on academic success for students who attended the MOST Conference. Utilizing various research pinpoints (e.g. stereotype threat, family network, and mentorship), additional research could assist in identifying key issues or strategies to support African American student success.

CHAPTER IV: SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Through this analysis of the research questions, we were able to examine and compare the GPA scores of MOST participants compared to Non-MOST participants. In Research Question One, the analysis of the results determined that there is a difference in the first semester mean GPA scores between MOST participants (2.57) and Non-MOST participants (2.49). The results displayed that MOST participants earned a slightly greater first semester GPA compared to Non-MOST participants. Even though this is true, the difference is not statistically significant. In Research Question Two, we sought to examine first-year GPAs for MOST and Non-MOST participants. The results denoted that first-year GPA mean of MOST participants is greater (2.49) than Non-MOST participants (2.42). Although there is a difference in mean GPA scores, the difference is not statistically significant. In Research Question Three, we examined the difference between MOST participants' mean first semester GPAs (2.57) and the mean second semester GPAs (2.23). Findings revealed the mean of MOST participants' first semester GPA is greater than their second semester GPAs. The results showed that the difference between first and second semester GPAs was statistically significant.

Meaningful Connections

After dissecting the results of our analysis, some themes arose in terms of our problem of practice. The importance of early intervention academic programs was evident in Research Question Three. Research indicates that early academic intervention programs assist with retention of students (Astin, 2005; Talbert, 2012). Rodgers and Summers (2008) noted that within their first-year of college African American students compare their academic abilities to

their White counterparts. With early intervention initiatives such as the MOST Program, students are provided resources and mentoring that can translate into higher notions of academic self-efficacy. Additionally, the perceived confidence and support from an academic community also may have contributed to the student's success. Through mentoring relationships, MOST participants are afforded academic and social guidance from students, faculty, and staff that have matriculated the collegiate arena.

The results of our analysis support Rodgers and Summers (2008) model as we seek to examine MOST participants' academic success. Students are connected to the MOST Program before they begin their collegiate journey at an institution. From our analysis of Research Question Three, students that participated in the program scored greater during the first semester rather than the second semester. By entering the program in the summer, students are provided with resources early to assist in building upon their academic self-efficacy as well as their motivation to attend college. Rodgers and Summers (2008) indicated, that "the academic self-efficacy with which African American students enter college is of interest because it could suffer an immediate negative blow upon the first experience of academic failure" (p. 175). Throughout the program, the students are provided with numerous interactional opportunities that foster a sense of belonging that provides them with additional support systems. Subsequently, during the student's tenure in the MOST Program, they are provided with opportunities for integration into the campus community. Rodgers and Summers (2008) discussed the importance of institutional fit that affects the African American student's attitudes about their institution that also assist with institutional commitment. As MOST Program participants, students are provided with mentors that assist with academic and social issues that may occur during their tenure at the University of Mississippi. Rodgers and Summers (2008) argued that students are faced with psychological

outcomes that may affect their retention. The results of Research Question Three also denotes that MOST participants obtain a statistically significantly greater first semester GPA compared to their second semester. The additional assistance in the first semester from mentors can reduce the stress that may contribute to this significant difference in GPAs. By MOST participants receiving superior GPAs during their first semester by being academically integrated, they receive improved intermediate outcomes compared to their second semester. Rodgers and Summers (2008) stated this leads to an intent to persist that further leads to actual persistence at an institution.

In terms of equitable practices, the MOST Program provides students with mentors that are people of color. Dahlving (2010) suggested that “At PWIs, African American students may not have access to a mentor who is a person of color” (p. 370). Students are given access and resources from faculty, staff, and peers who are of the same ethnicity as well as similar backgrounds as the MOST participants. Additionally, MOST participants’ perceptions of the campuses racial climate are altered based on their participation in the MOST Conference and Mentoring Program. As noted from student testimonies displayed in Manuscript One, their interactions with a large number of African American students, faculty, and staff was astonishing. Ethically, the MOST Program provides students with a pre-college initiative that assists with academic integration, social support, and overall inclusiveness. As noted from the analysis of our research questions, MOST participants score higher during the first semester compared to their second semester. MOST participants also earn slightly greater GPAs during their first semester and first-year; the results show that there is not a statistical difference. The academic resources and support provided by the MOST Program show increased GPAs for MOST participants from the first semester to the second semester. Viewing the academic worth

of the MOST Program from a social justice lens, increased academic GPAs lead to higher retention rates that also may lead to African American students obtaining equitable employment compared to other races (Harper et al., 2009).

As with most data, some inconsistencies may occur in the analysis of the results. While the MOST Program specifically targets African American students, other students who express interest in the MOST Conference are considered and allowed to participate. According to the University's *Cohort Info by Cohort Year with Special Status* UM Tableau dashboard, there are MOST participants who identify as "Two or More Races" and "American Indian/Alaskan." The MOST 2015 cohort included 129 "Black/African American" students, two "American Indian/Alaskan" students, and one student who identified as "Two or More Races." The MOST 2016 cohort included 99 "Black/African American" students and two students who identified as "Two or More Races." However, because the comparison group of Non-MOST participants included first-year African American students who enrolled in Fall 2016 and Fall 2017, we only analyzed GPA data for MOST participants who identified as "Black/African American."

In our study, we utilized 775 GPAs of MOST and Non-MOST students provided by IREP. It is important to note that 19 first semester GPAs for MOST and Non-MOST students, as well as, 84 second semester GPAs were recorded as zero. This occurrence may have affected the findings. During our analysis GPAs, we also found transfer GPAs and the enrollment in winter intersession or summer courses influenced the first-year GPAs for those students who took courses beyond the first and second semester at the University of Mississippi. This occurrence may have skewed overall findings. Therefore, we investigated transfer GPAs that MOST and Non-MOST participants obtained prior to their first semester at the University. Of the 228 MOST participants, 37% (n=84) recorded transfer GPAs that averaged 3.45 prior to their

enrollment at the University. Of the 547 Non-MOST participants, 30% (n=163) recorded transfer GPAs that averaged 3.37 prior to their enrollment at the University. MOST students transferred greater GPAs prior to their first semester than Non-MOST students. This occurrence may have factored into the GPAs for MOST vs. Non-MOST students for their first year at the University as well.

Addressing Hypothesis

To aid in our research study and to address our research questions, we hypothesized the estimated outcomes of our inquiry. In Research Question One, we hypothesized that MOST participants will earn higher first semester GPAs than other first semester Non-MOST African American students. While MOST participants mean first semester GPAs are greater than Non-MOST participants, the GPAs are not statistically different. In Research Question Two, we hypothesized that MOST participants will earn higher first-year GPAs than other first-year Non-MOST African American students. While MOST participants mean first-year GPAs are greater than Non-MOST participants, the mean GPAs are not statistically different. In Research Question Three, we hypothesized that MOST participants will earn higher average GPAs during their first semester as compared to their second semester. The results of the Dependent T-Test of this inquiry is that MOST participants earn higher average GPAs their first semester compared to their second semester. The results also note that there is a statistically significant difference between the GPA averages.

Implications

The results of this study have significant implications that are supported by various theories. Bean and Eaton's (2008) Psychological Model of Student Retention spoke to the student's perception of their academic ability as a factor to persistence. Rodgers and Summers

(2008) build upon this by including outcomes such as *Enjoyment of Learning/Internal Locus* to assist with explaining additional retention factors. From the results of this study, we can deduce that the MOST Program has an impact on academic performance as well as the students' internal locus on their academic self-efficacy. Dahlving (2010) denoted the importance of mentoring African American students at PWIs to assist in academic achievement. From this inquiry, we can attribute improved academic perception to some aspect of the mentoring component of the MOST Program. As stated previously, the MOST Program provides mentorship from students, faculty, and staff that have had experience or have transversed the academic arena. Talbert (2012) stated that "New student orientation programs that promote diversity are the gateway to student inclusiveness in academia" (p.24). The MOST Program provides this sort of orientation program for student's pre-enrollment and contributes to a sense of belonging throughout their tenure at the University of Mississippi. The results of this study can be used by administrators to create additional retention initiatives for students of color. The findings of this study suggest that the MOST Program adds additional academic value that leads to retention and persistence towards degree completion.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In Manuscript Two, we sought to determine if African American students really *Find the MOST* at the University of Mississippi. The data, provided by the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning and Registrar's Office, helped in answering important questions regarding the academic success of MOST participants. Given the institutional resources used to sustain the MOST Program, an analysis of GPAs allows for the justification of additional resources and making improvements where necessary. To determine the effectiveness of the MOST Program in enhancing academic success, we utilized GPAs of first-year African American students who entered the University of Mississippi in Fall 2016 and Fall 2017. Bean and Eaton's (2000) Psychological Model of Student Retention along with Rodgers and Summers (2008) Revised Model of Student Retention provided a framework for analyzing pre-existing data gathered through student surveys and the National Student Survey on Engagement. Specifically, we were able to draw conclusions related to the MOST participants' academic self-efficacy, academic integration, and sense of belonging.

The current findings also lend support for the MOST Conference positively supporting academic success. Although there was not a statistically significant difference, MOST participants did earn a greater first semester and first-year average GPA than their Non-MOST counterparts. The first-year retention for MOST 2015 participants is also 88.37% compared to the 82.64% retention rate for Non-MOST students. Likewise, MOST 2016 participants were retained 87.88%, while the retention rate for Non-MOST students was 79.64%. Additionally,

there is a statistically significant difference in MOST participants first semester GPA compared to their second semester GPA. While there may be several external factors, students connected to the MOST Program are achieving greater academic success during their first semester.

Reflecting on the findings, we will now discuss implications for policy and practice related to the academic success of first-year African American students at predominantly White institutions. In our final manuscript of this three-part series, we will also offer recommendations for enhancing the MOST Program at the University of Mississippi and influencing graduation outcomes for African American students attending PWIs.

LIST OF REFERENCES

References

- Astin, A. (2005). Making sense out of degree completion rates. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 7, 1-2, 5-17.
- Bean, J. P., & Eaton, S. B. (2000). A psychological model of college student retention. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp.48-61). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bean, J. P. (2005). Nine themes of college student retention. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success*, (pp. 215-244). Westport, CT: Prager Publishers.
- Boatright-Horowitz, S. L., Frazier, S., Harps-Logan, Y., & Crockett, N. (2013). Difficult times for college students of color: Teaching White students about White privilege provides hope for change. *Teaching In Higher Education*, 18(7), 698-708.
- Cohort info by cohort year with special status (n.d.). UM tableau. Retrieved from <https://tableau.olemiss.edu/#/views/StudentSuccessDashboard/CohortInfobyCohortYearWithSpecialStatus?:iid=1>.
- Dahlving, J. (2010). Mentoring of African American students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). *Christian Higher Education*, 9(5), 369-395.
- Dornbusch, S. M., Ritter, P. L., & Steinberg, L. D. (1991). Community influences on the relation of family statuses to adolescent school performance: Differences between African Americans and non-Hispanic whites. *American Journal of Education*, 99, 543-567.

- Eakins, A., & Eakins, S. L. (2017). African American students at predominantly White institutions: A collaborative style cohort recruitment & retention model. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education, 13*(2), 51-57.
- Eagles, C. W. (2009). *The price of defiance: James Meredith and the integration of Ole Miss*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.
- Grier-Reed, T., Madyun, N., & Buckley, C. (2008). Low Black student retention on a predominantly White campus: Two faculty respond with the African American student network. *Journal of College Student Development, 49*(5), 476-485.
- Harper, S. R., & Hurtado, S. (2011). Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. In S. R. Harper, J. F. Jackson, & A. E. Austin (Eds.), *Introduction to American higher education* (pp. 278-291). New York: Routledge.
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *Journal of Higher Education, 80*(4), 389-414.
- Johnson, L. (2013). The benefits of a comprehensive retention program for African American students at a predominantly White university. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning, 3*(1), 38-54.
- Liu, X. S., Loudermilk, B., & Simpson, T. (2014). Introduction to sample size choice for confidence intervals based on “t” statistics. *Measurement in Physical Education and Exercise Science, 18*(2), 91-100.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2004). *Student engagement: Pathways to collegiate success—2004 annual survey results*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2012). *Promoting student learning and institutional improvement: Lessons from NSSE at 13—Annual results 2012*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2017). *Engagement Indicators and High Impact Practices—Annual results 2017*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- Newton, B. C., Ghee, K. L., & Langmeyer, D. (2014). Correlates of African-American undergraduate student achievement: Implications for the prize initiative. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 15(4), 605-631.
- Retention, graduation, and student success (n.d.). UM tableau. Retrieved from <https://tableau.olemiss.edu/#/views/RetentionGraduationandStudentSuccess/GraduationTrends?iid=1>.
- Rodgers, K. A., & Summers, J. J. (2008). African American students at predominantly White institutions: A motivational and self-systems approach to understanding retention. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20(2), 171-190.
- Rowser, J. F. (1997). Do African American students' perceptions of their needs have implications for retention? *Journal of Black Studies*, 27, 718-726.
- Smith, E. (2018). MOST conference draws record number of college –bound students. *University of Mississippi News*. Retrieved from <https://news.olemiss.edu/conference-draws-record-number-college-bound-students/>.
- Solorzano, D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60-73.

- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613-629.
- Talbert, P. Y. (2012). Strategies to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 36(1), 22-24.
- Thelin, J. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

MANUSCRIPT THREE

CHAPTER I: SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

A night of rioting, the presence of federal troops and U.S. Marshals, and the death of two people followed the 1962 enrollment of the first African American student, James Meredith, at the University of Mississippi (Eagles, 2009). Across the United States, and especially in the South, African American students were denied access to higher education (Thelin, 2004). Meredith's enrollment became a defining event for the University that has continued to struggle with a history of segregation. To promote the success of African American students, the University of Mississippi established the Minority Achievement Conference (MAC) in the 1970s. MAC evolved into the Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent (MOST) Conference that now serves as a primary strategy for increasing access to African American students at the University of Mississippi. The MOST Conference, a partnership between the University of Mississippi's Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement (CICCE) and Office of Admissions, expanded in 2015 to include the MOST Reunion and MOST Mentoring Program.

Negative perceptions of racism have influenced the enrollment of African Americans at the University of Mississippi and nationwide (Eagles, 2009; Luther & Gallant, 2016; Syrluga, 2016). Nationally, educational disparities for African American students seeking higher education still exist. According to a 2019 study led by the American Council of Education (ACE), there are still significant inequities affecting African American students:

Too many Black students fare poorly in America's postsecondary education system. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, advances in Black students' enrollment and

attainment have been accompanied by some of the lowest persistence rates, highest graduate dropout rates, highest borrowing rates, and largest debt burdens of any group. (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019, p. 6)

In the previous manuscripts, we identified the enrollment and persistence of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as a complex and pressing problem of practice. The purpose of this Dissertation in Practice (DiP) is to explore the academic success of first-year African American students participating in the MOST Program

At the University of Mississippi, the four-year graduation rate for African American students is 25.9%, which is 23.8% lower than the four-year graduation rate for White students (Retention, Graduation and Student Success, n.d.). Furthermore, the six-year graduation rate is 64.2% for White students and only 42.4% for African American students, a difference of 21.8% (Retention, Graduation and Student Success, n.d.). Astin (2005) and Eakins & Eakins (2017) found academic success during the first year is critical to retention and overall graduation outcomes for African American students. Thus, it is important to understand if the academic success of MOST participants during the first year contribute to overall graduation outcomes for African American students. In this study, we explored if MOST participants earn a higher first-semester GPA and first-year GPA than Non-MOST participants. Additionally, we questioned if MOST participants earned a higher first semester GPA than second semester GPA.

Embarking on this research, we asserted the academic success of MOST participants in their first year was critical to first-year retention and improving overall graduation rates of African American students at the University of Mississippi. The MOST Conference that is an early-intervention, pre-college program connects students to campus resources, mentoring relationships, and additional support prior to and during their enrollment at the University of

Mississippi. Johnson (2013) and Eakins & Eakins (2017) reaffirmed the value that pre-admission programs contribute to a student's sense of belonging, specifically African American students attending PWIs. Additionally, a review of the literature revealed equitable access to higher education is still a concern (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002), how cultural differences influence retention outcomes (Rodgers & Summers, 2008), and early-intervention and mentoring programs positively influence retention and persistence for African Americans (Johnson, 2013; Davis, 2010). Thus, the MOST Program has the potential to serve as a model for other institutions committed to enhancing the experience of African American students.

In development of this DiP, we hypothesized MOST participants would earn a higher first semester and first-year GPA than Non-MOST participants. We also believed MOST participants would perform better academically during their first semester as compared to their second semester at the University of Mississippi. While not all of the findings were statistically significant, the results of the study affirmed that the MOST Program contributes to the academic success and retention of first-year African American students.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to study the relationship of academic success and first-year African American students enrolled at the University of Mississippi, we utilized Bean and Eaton's Psychological Model of Retention and Rogers and Summers' Revised Model of Retention for African American Students at PWIs. While both models account for entry characteristics, Rogers and Summers (2008) also acknowledged cultural differences that also influence African American student retention. Bean and Eaton (2000) concluded student's attitudes about institutional fit and their academic ability are also critical to retention. Most relevant to the present study, Rogers

and Summers (2008) suggested African American student persistence is closely connected to their sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy. Rogers and Summers (2008) also found mentoring relationships are key to African American student success at PWIs. According to *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2006), the mentoring aspect of initiatives like the MOST Program has the potential to positively influence student retention:

Many of the colleges and universities with high black student graduation rates have set in place orientation and retention programs to help black students adapt to the culture of predominantly white campuses. Mentoring programs for black first-year students involving upperclassmen have been successful at many colleges and universities. (“Black Student,” 2006, p. 88)

The conceptual frameworks lend support for continuously enhancing the MOST Program and specifically helping students feel a sense of belonging, develop academic self-efficacy, and provide opportunity for mentoring relationships. The focus on entry characteristics led the researchers to also consider future studies, specifically using a qualitative research design, that include using an instrument to assess student behaviors, attitudes, and other characteristics that might influence their academic success.

Data Analysis

Beginning with the current structure in 2015, the MOST Program now has four cohorts of in-state, African American students. With this study, we sought to determine the academic success of the first two cohorts who attended the 2015 and 2016 MOST Conference and respectively enrolled at the University in Fall 2016 and Fall 2017. To answer the three research questions, we analyzed quantitative data approved for use by the Registrar’s Office and provided by the University of Mississippi’s Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning

(IREP). The raw data included the first semester, second semester, and first-year GPAs as well as any transfer GPAs. Our initial analysis led to the discovery that summer session and winter intersession course grades were also factored into the first-year GPA. The inclusion of transfer GPAs and summer and intersession GPAs led to some discrepancies and challenges, but follow-up analysis led to valid and consistent findings.

There were also challenges related to some MOST and Non-MOST participants missing GPAs for their first or second semester. There were also challenges related to MOST (n=3) and Non-MOST (n=12) participants missing GPAs for their first or second semester. We are unable to determine the exact reasoning for the 15 missing GPAs, and this missing data may have skewed the findings. We also discovered the involvement of students in the MOST Program who did not identify as African American. While the MOST Conference targets African American students, other students of color may also apply to attend. Prospective students self-identify their race during the initial application process, and race is not used as a factor for selecting conference attendees. Therefore, when MOST Conference attendees who are not African American enroll at the University they are all considered part of the cohort. However, for this study, we excluded those MOST participants because our comparison group was only made up of first-year, African American students. Finally, there were challenges with gaining the correct comparison groups due to coding errors.

The visual charts referenced in Manuscript Two were compiled from the University of Mississippi's Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning *Tableau* dashboard. This retention-tracking tool provided us with the demographic, retention percentages and other identifiers for the comparison groups. Due to an inconsistency in coding some of the MOST participants were not initially identifiable. However, the principal investigators

discovered the discrepancy in the data set provided by IREP, followed up, and received the correct data for quantitative analysis. After proper coding, accounting for GPAs before and beyond the fall and spring semesters, and removing MOST participants who did not identify as African American, we analyzed GPAs for 228 MOST participants and 547 Non-MOST participants.

Retention data available in the University's *Cohort Info by Cohort Year with Special Status* UM Tableau dashboard allowed for a comparison of MOST versus Non-MOST fall-to-fall retention. Additionally, participant surveys administered by the CICCE to MOST participants and findings from the National Student Survey on Engagement provided qualitative data for review. The qualitative data allowed the researchers to draw upon themes such as sense of belonging identified in Bean & Eaton's (2001) Model of Student Retention. However, the qualitative nor quantitative data allowed the researchers to account for entry characteristics such as academic self-efficacy and past behaviors identified in Bean & Eaton's model. In the next section, we will discuss a summary of the findings and make meaningful connections.

CHAPTER II: SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The quantitative research method that was used in this project provided a glimpse into the academic success of first-year African American students at the University of Mississippi who attended the MOST Conference. The findings from this study suggest that the introduction of the University of Mississippi to prospective African American students through the MOST Conference may contribute to academic success during the first semester. The decline of second semester GPAs for MOST participants may occur because program resources decrease as students matriculate. Therefore, the administrators, faculty, and staff at the University of Mississippi can use these findings to enhance the three components of the MOST Program that include: a) The MOST Conference that occurs during the summer before the senior year of high school; b) The MOST Reunion that occurs during November of the senior year of high school; and c) The MOST Mentoring Program that serves students during the first year at the University of Mississippi.

In the summary of findings, we will provide a synopsis of the research questions, reflection on personal and professional positionality, and how this study impacts policy and practice. The findings provide insight regarding the importance of the MOST Conference and how it influences academic success. The principal investigators used quantitative statistical methods to examine differences between MOST and Non-MOST participants.

Research Question 1

Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first semester* GPA than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi? This

research question was addressed by dividing the respondents into two groups- MOST and Non-MOST. Results of the independent samples t-test determined that there was no statistically significant difference between MOST participants and Non-MOST participants. The results suggest that participants in the MOST Mentoring program produce a higher mean GPA than those that did not attend. However, the difference was not statistically significant. Therefore, the researchers cannot definitely conclude that participants who attended the MOST conference had higher first semester GPAs than other African American who did not attend the MOST Conference.

Research Question 2

Do MOST participants earn a higher average *first-year* GPA than other first-year African American students from Mississippi who attend the University of Mississippi? Research Question Two was created to provide substantial data to reinforce Research Question One. This allowed the principal investigators to see the trend of academic success for MOST students first-year GPAs compared to those in-state African Americans who did not attend the MOST Conference. The results denoted that first-year mean GPA of MOST participants (2.49) is greater than Non-MOST participants (2.42). Although there is a difference in mean GPA scores, the difference is not statistically significant. While there is not a statistical significance in the numbers, the findings of Research Question Two shows a trend that first-semester and first-year GPA are positively affected by attending the MOST Conference.

This research question was answered by comparing two groups—MOST students and first-year African Americans from Mississippi who did not attend the MOST Conference. The results of the independent sample t-test determined that there was no significant difference in MOST participants first-year GPA than other African Americans students who attended the

University of Mississippi. Therefore, the researchers cannot conclude that participants who attended the MOST conference had higher first-year GPA than other African Americans who did not attend the MOST Conference.

Research Question 3

During their first-year at the University of Mississippi, do MOST participants earn a higher average first semester GPA than second semester GPA? The overall academic success of MOST participants was evaluated in the Research Question Three. We examined the difference between MOST participants' mean first semester GPAs (2.57) and the mean second semester GPAs (2.23). Findings revealed the mean of MOST participants' first semester GPA is greater than their second semester GPAs. The results showed that the difference between first and second semester GPAs was statistically significant. The amount of resources given to students during their first semester includes mentoring, access to resources provided by the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement and an all access communication tool to ask questions. While enrollment in the MOST Mentoring Program continues throughout the first year, primary emphasis has been placed on the first semester by welcome week activities, mid-semester checks, and targeted programming. These front-loaded resources could be an indication of higher first semester GPA than second semester GPAs.

Research Question Three sought to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in MOST participants mean first semester GPA and the mean second semester GPA. This research question was addressed using a paired sample t-test to quantify the means of each semester. The results of the paired sample test determined that there was significant difference between the first semester GPA and the second semester GPA. The results of the question revealed that students who participated in the MOST Conference had a higher first

semester GPA than second semester GPA. Therefore, the researchers can conclude that attending the MOST Conference has a positive effect on participants' first semester GPA once enrolled at the University of Mississippi.

Retention Findings

At the University of Mississippi, MOST participants make up approximately 30% of African American students in the first-year class (Smith, 2018); exploring academic success aids administrators in the ongoing work to improve retention and completion rates of African American students. The retention findings (Figures 2.1-2.4) for MOST participants were positive in comparison to the overall institutional average. In the Fall 2016, 88.37% of African American freshman who attended the MOST Conference in 2015 were retained at a higher rate than those students who did not attend. In comparison, 87.88% of African American freshman who attended the MOST Conference in 2016 were also retained at a higher rate than those students who did not attend the conference. The MOST Conference is not solely responsible for the overall retention success of MOST participants; however, our research has indicated a relationship associated with higher percentages of retention for MOST participants.

Participant Surveys

The population in the study attended the MOST Conference and eventually became freshmen at the University of Mississippi. In order to capture the lived experiences of those in the MOST Mentoring Program participant surveys were administered to the selected cohorts. In addition to data retrieved through the IRB process, participant surveys were given to MOST participants through the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement. These participant surveys collected demographic information as well as information about their experiences as a student at the University of Mississippi. The surveys provided more details that included but

were not limited to MOST participants most difficult classes, student involvement, and academic goals. Additionally, the participant surveys provided statements that were reflected in Rodgers and Summers theoretical framework which emphasized the importance of a sense of belonging for students of color.

Reflection and Meaningful Connections

Collectively, the findings support the narrative that Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent participants really do *find the MOST* during their first year at the University of Mississippi. When compared to other first-year, African American students from the state of Mississippi, MOST participants receive a pre-college experience that connects them to campus resources, mentors, and connections to other prospective and first-year students. While we were unable to find a statistically significant difference in the first semester GPA or the first-year GPA for MOST participants compared to Non-MOST participants, the two MOST cohorts are retained at a higher rate than those African American students who do not participate in the conference. First-year retention has implications for overall persistence and graduation outcomes. Therefore, while not the primary focus of this study, the retention findings do have implications for improving overall student success.

The higher first semester and first-year mean GPAs for MOST participants also suggest that a connection to the MOST Program may provide an academic advantage. Given the challenges of the data and study, continued analysis of the MOST cohorts might reveal different outcomes. As implications for research and practice are presented later in this manuscript, we will also discuss recommendations for positively supporting the academic success of first-year African American students. The quantitative findings from the present study, while not all statistically significant, still provide a strong foundation for future research related to the MOST

Program. The findings also reveal areas of opportunity that aid in enhancing academic success for in-state, first-year African American students.

Of great importance is the MOST participants earning a statistically significant higher first semester GPA than second semester GPA. While this study did not reveal the reasoning for this difference, conclusions can be made regarding the additional resources and support students received through the MOST Program. The first semester that is often filled with welcome week activities, enrollment in first-year experience course, and pre-planned interactions with mentors, provides students with a wealth of opportunities to get connected and feel supported. The research findings suggest that MOST participants experienced a statistically lower GPA during the second semester. As scholar-practitioners, this finding helps us in addressing barriers to academic success during the second semester through additional research and programmatic changes.

Additionally, the participant surveys administered by the Center for Inclusion & Cross Cultural Engagement highlight the sense of belonging MOST participants experience after their involvement in the MOST Conference and subsequent enrollment at the University. These surveys provide a glimpse into qualitative data that expresses student's shared experiences of participating in the MOST Conference. These statements attest to the fact that the MOST Program has an impact on the perception of the University and how it connects them to the established network of attendees.

The findings of this study are meaningful for multiple constituents. For faculty, staff, and administrators who are striving to aid in the overall academic success of first-year African American students, this study is a comprehensive example of action to results. For first-year African American students who attend the MOST Conference and eventually become freshman

at the University of Mississippi, these findings offer motivation that they can succeed academically. And, for those involved in the development of the program, the findings offer affirmation that the work they are doing is having a positive impact on the success of African American students.

CHAPTER III: IMPROVING POLICY AND PRACTICE TO ENHANCE SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUITY AND ETHICS

Given the considerable human and financial resources that go into the development of the MOST Program, it was important to us as scholar-practitioners to determine if the MOST Program is having the desired impact. While the findings have provided some promising results, there is room for growth and improvement. In this section, we will discuss the implementation of further research and practices that will help increase academic success for first-year African American students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Previous research has focused on African American students at predominantly White colleges and universities (Allen & Epps, 1991; Allen, 1992). While the data gathered from this study provided insight regarding academic success of first-year African American students at the University of Mississippi, further research should be conducted. Specifically, research on various aspects of this study that could add to the narrative that pre-admission programs aid first-year African American students in academic success should be conducted. Five additional recommendations for research are discussed below.

Study Replication. The University of Mississippi is a public institution located in Oxford, Mississippi. According to the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness and Planning, the total undergraduate population is 17,572 and graduate students are 2,143 (2017-2018 Mini Fact Book). The findings of this study is limited to this particular institution and the MOST Program. A deeper study at the University of Mississippi that examines entry

characteristics, academic self efficacy, and retention trends could broaden the understanding of the African American student experience. In order to provide a more robust sample and study, this research can be replicated at peer institutions that have similar pre-admission programs for African American students. A broader national study on first-year African American academic success at PWIs is a possibility for further research.

Gender. The gender of the MOST participants was not evaluated in this study. According to Espinosa et al. (2019), Black students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs exhibited lower rates of first-year persistence and higher rates of dropping out than any other racial or ethnic group. Moreover, the gender gap in enrollment for Black students remained the widest of any group. In 2016, 62.2 percent of Black undergraduates and 70.2 percent of Black graduate students were women. A thorough look into the academic success between male and female MOST participants during their first-year would be beneficial. This research could assist with academic resources to help each gender excel academically.

Academic Majors. The two MOST cohorts analyzed in this study were from 2015 and 2016. Their overall grade point averages were quantified in the study. This included grades transferred from summer and winter semesters pre-freshman enrollment. However, various academic majors were not evaluated in order to see the effectiveness of the MOST Program on specific students in majors. Because the MOST Program is open access, there is great variability in students' interest. In this study, we generally analyzed GPAs. Analysis by major allows us to determine if African American students have full access to every program and the opportunity to succeed academically. From an equity lens, this could be beneficial in removing structural barriers and assisting administrators allocating appropriate resources.

High School to MOST Conference Pipeline. There are a total of 1,063 schools in the state of Mississippi. Being able to evaluate the location of the MOST participants and their various high schools could help with overall recruiting for the MOST Conference. An established pipeline to the MOST Conference and admission to the University of Mississippi might be researched for future studies. The Office of Admissions, and pre-college admission programs could utilize this data to be more intentional in recruitment. Highlighting students who attended a particular high school could show a trend to success for those that attended the MOST Conference. A core aspect of the MOST Program is the participation of rising seniors in high school attending the conference. Analyzing the academic rigor of MOST participants' high schools present additional research opportunities. Being able to pinpoint a possible trend from high schools to the University of Mississippi is a beneficial recruitment tool.

Academic Success of MOST Mentors. MOST Mentors are upperclassmen students who volunteer to serve as peer leaders during the MOST Conference. They play an integral role in connecting MOST participants to campus resources during and after the MOST Conference. Additionally, for those students who enroll at the University, MOST Mentors continue to support them throughout the first year. The primary purpose of the mentoring relationship is to keep MOST participants on track during the first year at the University and on a course toward graduation. In addition to balancing their own academic and co-curricular activities, MOST Mentors are expected to have constant communication with their mentees. Because the success of the MOST Program is heavily connected to the engagement and involvement of MOST Mentors, future research analyzing the academic success of MOST Mentors would be beneficial. Notably, when they are eligible to apply, many of the MOST participants continue to serve the program as MOST Mentors. It is important to know more

about MOST Mentors and academic achievement. For example, an analysis of GPAs of those mentors who participated in the MOST Program compared to those who did not might lead to valuable insights to enhance the mentoring experience. Furthermore, such an analysis will explore the potential value-added from the mentoring experience as an activity of student engagement that may contribute to academic achievement and student success.

Recommendations for Practice

The next steps to improved policy and practice in regards to promoting the MOST Conference are increasing High Impact Practices (HIPs). These practices were introduced into the study in Manuscript Two. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), these practices are positive interactions, events outside of the classroom and the enjoyment of being around a diverse group of people (NSSE, 2017). These practices can include intentional interactions with students in their community or areas of comfort (e.g. living learning communities, participant areas of campus frequented by students of color, attending campus events after hours). By improving the retention of first-year African American students, universities can assist with the overall graduation rates for these students. The following recommendations for practice are connected to HIPs and the overall findings of this study in order to aid in academic success for MOST participants. The recommendations are based on the University of Mississippi's potential and current resources to help students succeed in college, especially those associated with the MOST Mentoring Program cohorts.

MOST Program Expansion. One of the key aspects of this research study was to assess if the MOST Program aided in academic success. Due to our findings, we are able to see the validity in this signature program at the University of Mississippi. Therefore, providing recommendations to expand the current MOST Program in various aspects is essential to the

longevity and impact of the program. During the course of this Dissertation in Practice, the University of Mississippi allocated resources to the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement to hire a MOST Coordinator. This person is responsible for the various components of the MOST Program. The advantages of hiring a professional staff for this position is keeping a detailed account of the MOST cohorts who are currently matriculating at the University. Additionally, in the hiring of the MOST Coordinator, the University has the human resources to increase the number of summer conferences hosted by the MOST Program. This investment in recruitment can be a catalyst to attract, enroll and graduate more African American students at the University of Mississippi. The expansion of the MOST Program also includes the establishment of an upperclassmen scholarship, increased budget allocation, and development of a MOST Living-Learning Community (LLC).

Upperclassmen Scholarship. The importance of the MOST Program is confirmed by our findings. As an institution is imperative to donate resources to aid in the expansion of this vital resource. We recommend a scholarship for upperclassmen for MOST participants. This scholarship would aid in the retention and overall graduation rate of African Americans students who attended the MOST Conference. The institutional resources are often front loaded for freshmen, but having a built in financial incentive for upperclassman can be helpful (Hernández-Julián , 2010; Danns, 2014).

Budget. Currently the MOST Program has an allocated budget. Campus partners and external stakeholders also contribute to the success of the program. However, as the program continues to grow, institutional funding will need to be increased in order to account for growth. Previous research suggests that the importance of pre-college programs attempt to provide students with the social capital necessary to achieve college enrollment (Perna, 2002).

Therefore, adequate budget allocation and resources to pre-college programs such as the MOST Program are essential to the overall mission of the university.

MOST Living-Learning Community. Examining the academic life of students who are now enrolled in the MOST Mentoring program was the catalyst for creating the MOST living-learning Community. The newly formed LLC will launch in the Fall 2019. Prior research suggests that these communities also aid in the overall retention of students of color. The importance of living learning communities has been researched and substantiated by leading academics. According to Vincent Tinto (2003) students who live in these communities are able to benefit from three major components: building relationships with people who reside in a shared environment, access to build a co-curriculum outside the classroom and being in proximity to students that can hold each other accountable for academic success. These components coupled with a connection to the MOST Program can aid in retention. The programming, selection of resident assistants and interactions of a living learning community are essential to its success. This recommendation allows MOST participants to have continuous interactions with students similar to them. Those peer to peer transactions create social capital that students can utilize to gain future academic and economic advantages (Glass & Gesing, 2018). This interaction creates a sense of belonging which aids in overall retention (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

Collaboration with Existing Collegiate Student Programs. Institutionally, the University of Mississippi has collegiate student programs that aid in academic success for underrepresented students. Some of these include: Foundations for Academic Success Track (FASTrack), the Luckyday Program, Jumpstart, the Louis Stokes Mississippi Alliance for Minority Participation (LSMAMP) IMAGE program , and the Ole Miss Opportunity Scholarship

Program. These identified programs are an existing network that can assist the MOST participants once they enroll at the University of Mississippi. By intentionally connecting MOST students to these existing programs, we can establish these increased feelings of belonging. Additionally, cross programming, shared resources and collaborations with the MOST Program would provide multiple points of access and support to these students.

Connecting to Existing Academic Resources. A component of the MOST Mentoring program is connecting mentors with mentees. This vital aspect of the program is an academic resource for freshman to aid them in learning about the collegiate experience. Currently, the University of Mississippi has numerous resources that provide academic support for students. The range of services include math support services, writing labs, the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and support services provided by the University community. Utilizing MOST Mentors to inform their mentees of these resources is a vital academic practice that can aid in academic success.

Improved MOST Tracking. The first cohort of MOST participants will graduate in Spring 2020. These students attended the MOST Conference in 2015 and enrolled at the University of Mississippi in the Fall of 2016. As aforementioned in our findings, there was some discrepancies in identifying MOST participants through the retention-based tool *Tableau*. Being able to properly code MOST students upon entry into the University is vital to the tracking of these students. This recommendation suggests improved MOST tracking in order to provide administrators with viable data to analyze cohorts. With this improvement, we are able to evaluate retention, GPAs, and the overall persistence of students who enrolled in the MOST Mentoring Program. With this improvement, a significant and traceable pipeline from enrollment to graduation would be consistently tracked. Additionally, using the findings of this

study, participant surveys administered by the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement can be redesigned to better understand their academic challenges and goals.

Dissemination of Findings

The dissemination of findings of this study to the University of Mississippi stakeholders is vital to improving and endorsing the MOST Program. Displaying the results of this research to University of Mississippi administrators can assist in validating the need for expanding the MOST Program. This will also assist the MOST stakeholders in authenticating the allocation of additional funding for the initiative. The need for institutional leadership to provide retention initiatives to African American students is a vital issue in higher education. By disseminating these results, we can demonstrate that the MOST Program is an initiative that may assist in alleviating retention challenges. In an effort to improve and expand the MOST Program, the results of this study can benefit the university's MOST Coordinator as well as the MOST Conference planning committee. The recommendations suggested for research and practice can also be utilized by institutional staff at the University of Mississippi and peer institutions. By implementing the suggested recommendations, the MOST Program can be enhanced for future African American students.

The results of this study can be utilized by peer institutions as a framework initiative that can be implemented at their institution. By examining the three research questions closely, institutions can generalize concepts that were presented through our findings. For example, Research Question Three noted that MOST participants earned greater GPAs the first semester rather than the second semester. This establishes that resources should be allocated throughout the entire first-year to positively affect African American student's academic success. These results can be applied for peer institutions for the formation of an initiative comparable to the

MOST Program. Even though this may be true, the results may not replicate exactly as they have at the University of Mississippi.

This study and findings will also contribute to the growing body of literature that relates to African American student success. In order to share this knowledge, we will develop proposals for regional and national conference presentations. The impact of pre-admission programs for African American students in achieving academic success warrants further exploration and our findings can serve as a basis for continued study.

Further Considerations

After engaging in this research study, we have identified areas for further consideration that may influence the application of initiatives similar to the MOST Program. Having such initiatives are imperative to the success of African American students and institutional stakeholders that seek to increase the retention and graduation rates for this population. The feasibility as well as cost/benefit analysis must be determined before embarking upon such an endeavor. When implementing a similar program on a national level, key components such as program design and institutional buy-in must be addressed. Johnson (2013) reported that universities that identify African American students during pre-admission and within the first few weeks are more successful in retaining students. For this reason, the program design for such an initiative is critical to its sustained success and the overarching goal of African American student retention. Additionally, members of the MOST Conference planning committee have served above and beyond their required job responsibilities to ensure the success of the program. Therefore, buy-in by campus partners and institutional leaders will play a vital role in the success of developing initiatives like the MOST Program. Tinto (2012) also stated that institutional leaders play a major role in molding the exceptional climate of their campuses and

students (p. 15). By institutional leaders setting forth positive expectations, some challenges for implementing initiatives similar to the MOST Program can be mitigated.

There are also additional considerations related to implementing a similar program nationally. For instance, this is a quantitative study that did not evaluate the lived experiences of first-year African American students. The lived experiences that African American students face can be a determining factor for a student's academic success as well as retention. Eakins and Eakins (2017) noted the importance of understanding the campus climate that African American students experience that can factor into the student's decision to remain at an institution. Another consideration is the lack of peer institutions hosting programs similar to MOST to serve as a control group. The uniqueness of the MOST Program makes it difficult to determine baseline expectations for this study. For this study, we utilized first-year GPAs as a barometer of success for the MOST Program. Understanding this, we based our hypothesis against Non-MOST in-state, first-year African American students at the University of Mississippi. As noted throughout this Dissertation in Practice, the disturbing history of the University of Mississippi in regards to African American students presents another element that could not be controlled within this study. Therefore, the results of this study may not generalize at other institutions with different historical challenges related to race. While the University's history of exclusion is being actively addressed, African American students may experience challenges inside and outside of the classroom that affect their abilities to succeed academically. Nevertheless, we encourage institutional leaders to identify strategies that actively support the academic success, retention, and persistence of African American students. The MOST Conference, Reunion, and Mentoring Program serve as one model for positively impacting African American student success.

In addition to not evaluating students' lived experiences, the present study does not measure student learning. While GPA data is sufficient in determining academic attainment, it does not reveal learning. Arum and Roksa (2011) first warned that graduates are "failing to develop the higher-order cognitive skills that is widely assumed college students should master (p. 121). Furthermore, Arum and Roksa (2014) concluded that aimlessly drifting through the undergraduate years lead to college graduates who are underprepared to make the transition into adulthood. While academic success in this study is defined as first semester and first-year GPA, there are many other factors to consider when evaluating a student's ability to succeed academically. Factors such as high school GPA, the rigor of a student's high school curriculum, and the percentage of ethnic diversity within the high schools were not factored into this study. Bean and Eaton (2001) noted that a student's entry characteristics such as academic curriculum is a factor that influences academic success as well as retention. Rodgers and Summers (2008) stated that a student's attitude towards their institutional fit can influence academic success. African American students who may have attended a less diverse high school may have trouble adjusting and succeeding at a PWI. The lack of academic success for students will inadvertently influence retention. This is highly important for institutions seeking to increase retention and persistence efforts for African American students. Academic success can be a fickle subject to define. A student's definition of academic success and an institutions definition of academic success may differ. With this being evident, it is important to incorporate a shared vision of academic success between students and administration.

CHAPTER IV: SUMMARY OF MANUSCRIPT

In Manuscript Three, we have provided recommendations for enhancing the MOST Program at the University of Mississippi as well as implementing similar initiatives at peer institutions. By embarking upon this research study, we were able to establish that the first-year success of African American students is a critical issue that must be addressed by institutional leaders. By utilizing Bean and Eaton's Psychological Model of Retention and Rogers and Summers Revised Model of Retention for African American Students at PWIs as a theoretical framework, we denoted the need for additional support for the MOST Program. With data from the University of Mississippi's Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning, we were able to analyze GPAs to examine our claims of academic success for MOST participants.

We reviewed this Problem of Practice through an equity, ethics, and social justice lens as well as addressed how the MOST Program assists in overcoming inequalities in higher education for African American students. We analyzed the GPA data through our three research questions that were used as the baseline for this study. We presented the findings of this study as well as recommendations for research and practice. We also addressed further considerations of this study and how the results can be replicated for peer institutions. Again, the overarching question of did African American students really *Find the MOST* at the University of Mississippi during their first-year served as a common theme for this Dissertation in Practice. Considering the collective findings, we concluded the MOST Program does serve as a model for encouraging academic success and supporting African American student retention at PWIs.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The success of first-year African American students attending PWIs has been explored through a multifaceted perspective that has been revealed throughout this Dissertation in Practice. Bean and Eaton's Psychological Model of Retention and Rogers and Summers Revised Model of Retention for African American Students at PWIs served as our theoretical framework in which we utilized to base our study. Through the identification of our Problem of Practice, we have denoted the academic success of first-year African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as an obstacle that must be overcome.

Reflecting back on this Problem of Practice from an equity, ethics, and social justice perspective, we have justified the need for the investigation of this issue. In regards to equity, removing the barriers for student success amongst African American students should be paramount for institutions of higher education (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). African American students are faced with various systematic obstacles that hinder their ability to succeed at PWIs (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). The MOST Program provides a multilayered support framework to assist African American students in their journey towards success. By understanding the unique challenges that African American students face during their first year at the University of Mississippi, the MOST Program can promote student achievement through a myriad of initiatives. From an ethics lens, Rodgers and Summers (2008) stated that a sense of belonging provides African American students motivation to succeed at PWIs. Institutions must foster inclusivity to aid in the promotion of African American student success. The MOST Program provides primarily African American mentors for first-year African American students.

By doing this, MOST participants are afforded African American peer mentors that have faced similar experiences. Dahlving (2010) emphasized the importance of African American mentorship as a contributing factor of African American student success at PWIs. Through a social justice lens, an institution's ability to correct social injustices is an immediate concern for all institutions. Specifically, at PWIs, African American students encounter social inequities that their White counterparts do not face (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). The MOST Program provides an outlet for African American students in their search for social and academic success. MOST participants are provided with a pre-admission summer conference hosted by the MOST Program. This conference provides early interventions for the students on their journey of academic success and self-exploration. Johnson (2013) stated that pre-admission early intervention programs promote academic retention and persistence. Therefore, by the University of Mississippi investing in and promoting the MOST Program, we can provide a structure that other PWIs can follow to ensure a sense of belonging and academic success of first-year African American students.

Given the University of Mississippi's continued efforts to distance itself from its segregationist past and increase access, the institution must actively seek ways to improve first-year retention for African American students. As the primary vehicle to support the enrollment and retention of African American students, the continued success of the MOST Program is essential. Therefore, studying the academic success of MOST participants was a necessary endeavor. As 2015 and 2016 MOST participants begin to graduate and more cohorts matriculate through the first year, the University of Mississippi can continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the MOST Program in promoting academic success and influencing retention and persistence outcomes. The implementation of the recommended research and practices have the potential to

move the MOST Program toward this next level. With increased support and the intentional focus on academic success, this program truly has the potential to help students *Find the MOST* at the University of Mississippi.

LIST OF REFERENCES

References

- 2017-2018 Mini fact book. (n.d.) University of Mississippi website. Retrieved from https://irep.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/98/2018/02/Mini-Fact-Book-in-Excel_2017-2018.pdf.
- Astin, A. (2005). Making sense out of degree completion rates. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 7, 1-2, 5-17.
- Allen, W. (1992). The color of success: African-American college student outcomes at predominantly White and historically Black public colleges and universities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(1), 26-45.
- Allen, W. R., & Epps, E. G. (1991). *College in Black and White: African American students in predominantly White and in historically Black public universities*. SUNY Press.
- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. University of Chicago Press.
- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2014). *Aspiring adults adrift: Tentative transitions of college graduates*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bean, J. P., & Eaton, S. B. (2000). A psychological model of college student retention. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp.48-61). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bean, J. P. (2005). Nine themes of college student retention. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success*, (pp. 215-244). Westport, CT: Prager Publishers.

Black student college graduation rates remain low, but modest progress begins to show.

(2006). *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (50), 88-96.

Boatright-Horowitz, S. L., Frazier, S., Harps-Logan, Y., & Crockett, N. (2013). Difficult times for college students of color: Teaching White students about White privilege provides hope for change. *Teaching In Higher Education*, 18(7), 698-708.

Cohort info by cohort year with special status (n.d.). UM tableau. Retrieved from <https://tableau.olemiss.edu/#/views/StudentSuccessDashboard/CohortInfobyCohortYearWithSpecialStatus?:iid=1>.

Davis, D. J. (2010). The academic influence of mentoring upon African American undergraduate aspirants to the professoriate. *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, 42(2), 143-158.

Dahlvig, J. (2010). Mentoring of African American students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). *Christian Higher Education*, 9(5), 369-395.

Danns, D. E. (2014). Financial education in state colleges and universities in the US: A study of program offerings and students' needs (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia).

Dornbusch, S. M., Ritter, P. L., & Steinberg, L. D. (1991). Community influences on the relation of family statuses to adolescent school performance: Differences between African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites. *American Journal of Education*, 99, 543-567.

Eagles, C. W. (2009). *The price of defiance: James Meredith and the integration of Ole Miss*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.

- Eakins, A., & Eakins, S. L. (2017). African American students at predominantly White institutions: A collaborative style cohort recruitment & retention model. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education, 13*(2), 51-57.
- Espinosa, L., Turk, J., Taylor, M., & Chessman, H. (2019). Race and ethnicity in higher education: A status report. *The American Council on Education*. Retrieved from <https://1xfsu31b52d33idlp13twtos-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/REHE-Exec-Summary-FINAL.pdf>
- Gurin, P., Dey, E., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review, 72*(3), 330-367.
- Grier-Reed, T., Madyun, N., & Buckley, C. (2008). Low Black student retention on a predominantly white campus: Two faculty respond with the African American student network. *Journal of College Student Development, 49*(5), 476-485.
- Harper, S. R., & Hurtado, S. (2011). Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. In S. R. Harper, J.F. Jackson, & A.E. Austin (Eds.), *Introduction to American higher education* (pp. 278-291). New York: Routledge
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *Journal of Higher Education, 80*(4), 389-414.
- Hernández-Julián, R. (2010). Merit-based scholarships and student effort. *Education Finance and Policy, 5*(1), 14-35.
- Johnson, L. (2013). The benefits of a comprehensive retention program for African American students at a predominantly White university. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning, 3*(1), 38-54.

- Liu, X. S., Loudermilk, B., & Simpson, T. (2014). Introduction to sample size choice for confidence intervals based on “t” statistics. *Measurement in Physical Education and Exercise Science, 18*(2), 91-100.
- Luther, C., & Gallant, J. (2016). *Ole Miss students occupy Lyceum to protest student’s racist comments*. Retrieved from <http://www.wmcactionnews5.com/story/33168134/ole-miss-students-occupy-lyceum-to-protest-students-racist-comments/>
- Perna, L. W. (2002). Pre-college outreach programs: Characteristics of programs serving historically underrepresented groups of students. *Journal of College Student Development, 43*(1), 64-83.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2004). *Student engagement: Pathways to collegiate success—2004 annual survey results*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2012). *Promoting student learning and institutional improvement: Lessons from NSSE at 13—Annual results 2012*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2017). *Engagement Indicators and High Impact Practices—Annual results 2017*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- Newton, B. C., Ghee, K. L., & Langmeyer, D. (2014). Correlates of African-American undergraduate student achievement: Implications for the prize initiative. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 15*(4), 605-631.

- Retention, graduation, and student success (n.d.). UM tableau. Retrieved from <https://tableau.olemiss.edu/#/views/RetentionGraduationandStudentSuccess/GraduationTrends?iid=1>.
- Rodgers, K. A., & Summers, J. J. (2008). African American students at predominantly White institutions: A motivational and self-systems approach to understanding retention. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20(2), 171-190.
- Rowser, J. F. (1997). Do African American students' perceptions of their needs have implications for retention? *Journal of Black Studies*, 27, 718-726.
- Smith, E. (2018). MOST conference draws record number of college-bound students. *University of Mississippi News*. Retrieved from <https://news.olemiss.edu/conference-draws-record-number-college-bound-students/>.
- Solorzano, D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60-73.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613-629.
- Svrluga, S. (2016). Former Ole Miss student pleads guilty to hanging noose around statue honoring the first Black student. Retrieved from *The Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/03/24/former-ole-miss-student-pleads-guilty-to-hanging-noose-around-statue-honoring-the-first-black-student/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.22d0c835331f
- Talbert, P. Y. (2012). Strategies to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 36(1), 22-24.

Thelin, J. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

VITA

SHAWNBODA MEAD

EDUCATION

M.A. in Education, Western Kentucky University, May 2007

Concentration: Student Affairs in Higher Education

B.S., Educational Psychology, Mississippi State University, August 2004

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Assistant Vice Chancellor for Diversity, September 2018-Present

Division of Diversity and Community Engagement

The University of Mississippi

Director, July 2014-September 2018

Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement

The University of Mississippi

Associate Director, Diversity and Multicultural Education, June 2012-July 2014

Office of Multicultural Student Life

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Assistant Director, Residence Education and First Year Experience, July 2008-May 2012

Department of Residence Life

The University of Southern Mississippi

Student Development Specialist III, Leadership and Service, June 2007-June 2008

Department of Student Activities

Texas A& M University

Full-time Residence Hall Director, April 2006-May 2007

Department of Housing and Residence Life

Western Kentucky University

Full-time Assistant Residence Hall Director, July 2004-April 2006

Department of Housing and Residence Life

Western Kentucky University

CERTIFICATIONS

Social Justice Training Institute Graduate, June 2017

Allies for Inclusion (Ability Ally), April 2017

Safe Zone (Allies) Instructor, April 2014

StrengthsQuest Educator, November 2007

HONORS AND AWARDS

University of Mississippi Staff Member of the Month, May 2017

The Dozier/Toney Award for Support of the UM Gospel Choir, 2016

SACSA Bobby E. Leach Award for Multicultural Relations on Campus, 2015

The Donald Cole Award for Excellence in Empowering, Leading, and Mentoring, 2015

SACSA Mid-Level Professional Award, 2014

SACSA New Professional Award, 2009

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences Outstanding Graduate Student, 2007

Student Affairs in Higher Education Outstanding Graduate Student, 2007